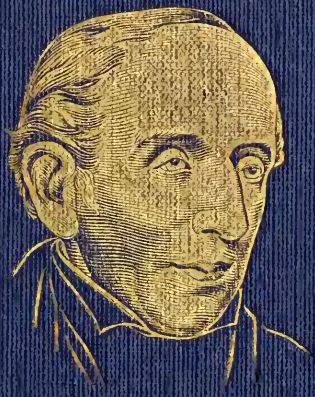

In Roberts:

MODERN ENGLISH LITERATURE

Gul. Faithorne ad Vivum. Delin. et sculpsit.
Ioannis Miltoni Effigies Ætat: 62.
1670.

JOHN MILTON.

MODERN ENGLISH LITERATURE

FROM CHAUCER TO THE PRESENT DAY

BY

G. H. MAIR

AUTHOR OF "ENGLISH LITERATURE: MODERN"
(Home University Library)

WITH PORTRAITS

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PREFACE

This book is an expansion of the volume on "Modern English Literature" which I wrote two years ago for the Home University Library. A considerable number of additions and corrections have been made, and authors have been dealt with whom it was impossible to include in the smaller book. Particularly the study of modern English literature has been taken back to Chaucer, with whom it may be said strictly to begin, so that the book now covers more or less the whole range of those English authors whose work can be read without the intervention of the philologist or the professor of dead dialects. Its plan, however, remains the same, that is to say, it aims at maintaining an individual point of view, at laying stress on ideas and tendencies rather than at recording facts and events, and it does not hesitate to draw generously on standard works of criticism and biography with which students are familiar. I believe most of my debts are acknowledged; for any which are not I crave pardon. The portraits which accompany the text have been carefully chosen and are believed to be the most characteristic in each case of the authors whom they represent.

G. H. M.

TO

MY FATHER AND MOTHER

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ENGLISH LITERATURE

CHAPTER I

FROM CHAUCER TO MORE

(1)

It used to be the habit of historians of English literature and, still more, of English poetry, to describe Geoffrey Chaucer as the father of English verse. The title has fallen out of repute since scholarship carried the history of English literature backwards, through his predecessors in what is called middle English, to the authors of the old English epic and elegiac poems, but in its essence the title and the idea which lay behind it were both sound. His successors owe more to Chaucer than he owed to the Englishmen at any rate, who went before him. The great outburst of poetic genius which took place when the Renaissance reached England and afterwards, owed more to him than to any foreign originator. The work of such poets as Surrey and Wyatt and Spenser derived most of its distinctive qualities from what it had learned out of his work. He gave words and phrases to them, plots to Shakespeare, inspira-

tion to Milton, and material for the modernising activities of Dryden and Pope and Wordsworth. For the scholars our literature may begin earlier; for the poets it began with him, and if we go no further back, though we may miss something which is interesting in itself, we shall certainly lose nothing which affects what is to come afterwards.

Old English poetry, for all its gravity and beauty and its atmosphere charged with the life of the sea-roving tribes who colonised our islands, is written in a language as distinct from that of modern English as German is at the present day. Middle English poetry, that is to say the poetry of the two hundred years preceding Chaucer, has little literary merit, is always rude, sometimes unrhythmical, and never more than baldly narrative. Moreover, though it approaches infinitely more nearly to modern speech than poetry written before the Conquest, it is not possible to read it without the help of a dictionary; and though a complete study of English literature could not fail to take it into account, it is not modern in the sense in which the word is used in this book, because it bears no direct relation to what comes after it. Chaucer owed little to it. When he drew from his predecessors—which he did largely, being, like all great authors, not afraid of plagiarism,—he went to Italy and France. He brought, therefore, into English literature that factor which has constantly operated since his

day, namely the close relation, sometimes acting one way, sometimes another, between writing in our country and writing in the Continent. And for all the obsolete words which his poems contain, he wrote in modern English and he sang in modern metres. There is a wider difference between *The Canterbury Tales* and the *Vision of Piers Plowman*, which is nearly contemporary with them, than there is between the *Tales* and the *Faerie Queen*. Langland is the end of an old order, Chaucer the beginning of the new.

It would be almost impossible to exaggerate the extent of the innovation which Chaucer made in the use of the English language for literary purposes. He is the creator of English poetry, or at least of English poetic forms. All his metres except one—the eight-syllable verse, which was already in use, and has persisted as one of the modes of English poetry—he had to make for himself. Under the influence of French and afterwards Italian poetry, he produced the ten-syllable verse, which has been the chosen metre of English poetry since his day: either rhymed, as in the heroic couplet, or in stanzas, as used by Spenser and by the romantic poets of a later day, or unrhymed, as in blank verse, which was devised by the earlier poets of the English Renaissance on the basis of his metre. He introduced the seven-line stanza, which has been largely used for narrative poetry ever since. He was the

first Englishman to experiment in the sonnet, and he used quite naturally the forms of the ballade and the rondeau, which, in spite of what he wrote in them, did not become completely naturalised in English poetry till fifty years ago.

But his greatest achievement, that which had most moment for the future, was that he set English on its feet as the literary language of this country, and particularly that dialect of English spoken in London and the counties to the north of it, roughly between London and Birmingham, the dialect with which he and everyone moving round the Court was most familiar. Chaucer's English, which was "the King's English" (the phrase still persists), became, from the language of English writers, gradually the spoken language of the whole country. Even in his day, when the law-courts were beginning to use it, the fortunes of literary English were still uncertain. His contemporary, Gower, typified this uncertainty by writing three poems, of which one was in French, one in Latin, and one in English. In Scotland, where the knowledge of Latin was more general, it was used habitually by educated people, and was even more familiar to them than the vernacular; so that Chaucer, in using English, was adopting an attitude the novelty of which it is hardly possible to appreciate properly at the present day. He deliberately chose the common tongue because it was really living, and because it had spread up

to the higher classes of the people; but he resolved at the same time to endow it with all the grace and refinement which instinct and knowledge enabled him to appreciate in French poetry; and if we grant him in this a clearer vision of his aims than he really had, we cannot overrate the consequences of his choice. By throwing the weight of his genius into the balance against French, he decided the future; by importing all the excellences and graces of French verse into poems written in the particular English of his district, he severed himself from the literary past of English writing and founded the modern literary language of the nation; and because he did so, he is the real father of English poetry.

It is not necessary to linger over the chronology of Chaucer's work. His earliest things seem to have been the product solely of French influence, and he seems to have begun with lyric poetry, making known to England the new forms—ballade, rondeau, and so on—which had just been made popular in France. At the beginning, indeed, his mind seems to have been French in its outlook, and, if style alone be considered, no trace of the Anglo-Saxon literary past of the country persists in its verse. The light touch which pervades it is precisely the same as that of the best of its French contemporaries. There is in it a sense of the mere joyousness of living, which comes out in his fondness for sunlight and springtime and the flowers

and birds of May, and everything that he tells, he tells in an even voice, pitched so that he can relate without fatigue or failing a long and leisurely moving story—the voice of the poets of contemporary France. He has, too, the charm of that easy French simplicity which comes from a perfect correspondence of words which are neither difficult nor difficultly used, with thought that is always equable and never deep.

> "A thousand tymes have I herd men telle,
> That ther is joye in heven and peyne in helle;
> And I accorde wel that hit is so;
> But natheles, yit wot I wel also,
> That ther nis noon dwelling in this contree,
> That either hath in heven or helle y-be,
> Ne may of hit non other weyes witen
> But as he hath herd seyd, or founde it writen."

It was his training in the precise and difficult forms of French artificial verse which gave him his ease and mastery in his later narrative poetry. Many of his early ballades are no doubt lost to us, but the fruit of them remains in the direct and brilliant compression with which in one or two stanzas of a poem like *Troilus* or *The Prioress's Tale* he can set a situation of a picture before the mind of his readers. His earlier narrative poems were written while he was still subjecting himself to this training, and they show the effect of it very little, being done on the model which was so popular in his day, that of the *Romance of the Rose*, and showing little sign of the originality in

handling his material which he was afterwards to achieve. Such work is to be found in *The Death of Blanche the Duchess*, *The House of Fame*, *The Parliament of Fowls*, and *The Legend of Good Women*. All these are allegorical, and they are overweighted with learning of the mediæval kind; for though Chaucer was contemporary with and had probably met Petrarch, he still looked at Rome through the eyes of a troubadour and not of a humanist. One of them, *The House of Fame*, contains almost as much autobiography as is to be found in the *Canterbury Tales*, passages in which he gives us a kind of picture of his daily life, of the books he read, and of the character and turn of his mind.

". . . thou hast no tydinges
Of Loves folk, if they be glade,
Ne of noght elles that god made;
And noght only fro fer contree
That ther no tyding comth to thee,
But of thy verray neyghebores,
That dwellen almost at thy dores,
Thou herest neither that ne this;
For whan thy labour doon al is,
And hast y-maad thy rekeninges,
In stede of reste and newe thinges,
Thou gost hoom to thy hous anoon;
And, also domb as any stoon,
Thou sittest at another boke,
Til fully daswed is thy loke,
And livest thus as an hermyte
Although thyn abstinence is lyte."

Had Chaucer died at the age of forty, he would

have had a reputation something similar to that of his contemporary Gower; that is to say, we would have had to look upon him as a man with a light and easy turn for versifying, a remarkable faculty for transferring the smoothness and gracefulness of French into his own tongue, but not a great artist, although of course one who would have been historically important. That he is so much more than this is due to a fresh source of inspiration which came to him at that age, opened up to him a new literature and new ways of thinking, and stimulated the development of his mind in a new and original direction. Some time shortly after he was thirty he visited Italy, and in the ten years which followed he must have made himself familiar with Italian letters. We know that he had read Dante, and that he understood the greatness of Petrarch, though, judging from their works, one would say that there was little intellectually in common between the two men. Boccaccio he must have heard about, and it is one of the unsolved puzzles of Chaucerian scholarship that there should be no mention of him in Chaucer's works. Where we know that Boccaccio must be referred to we find the mysterious name "Lollius," which has not been found anywhere else; and though *Troilus and Cressida* is based on a poem of the Italian, Chaucer oddly enough does not seem to have known of the *Decameron*, an even more amazing circumstance when it is

considered that the scheme of the *Canterbury Tales* is in a way related to that of Boccaccio's great book. At any rate, he got two great things from him. One was *Troilus and Cressida*, and the other was *The Knight's Tale*, the former of them certainly the greatest narrative poem in modern English even as it is the earliest. To read it is to realise afresh that at its highest moments there is no such thing as "progress" in literature; perfection reached as surely by a master in the fourteenth century as in the seventeenth or the nineteenth, or as it was five hundred years before the first.

In spite of the greatness of the *Troilus*, however, it is not by it mainly that he has been remembered by those who have come after him. What the impulse was which set Chaucer about compiling the *Canterbury Tales* we do not know, and we can hardly safely guess. It is unlikely that he had read the *Decameron*, and at any rate the scheme of the Canterbury pilgrimage bears none but the most superficial resemblance to the precise and artificial form of Boccaccio. All the speakers in his book belong to the same rank of society, and there is no reason why one should be distinguished from another; they all possess the same even elegance of speech, whether the tale be comic or tragic, shocking or romantic. The variety of the subject-matter in his stories is almost as great as their number, but there is no variety in the manner

of telling them, and probably not the closest or most familiar student of the book could name the narrator of even the best known of them. In the *Canterbury Tales*, on the other hand, the scheme of a number of stories related by different persons is approached from the other end. Boccaccio cared much for his stories and little for the lords and ladies of Florence who tell them. Chaucer's first and last interest was with his pilgrims and not with his tales. When his interest flagged or became indolent, he had no hesitation in simply using up whatever material he had ready to his hand and putting it as a story into the mouth of one of his characters. Many of the tales are certainly older than the scheme into which they are put, and indeed it would be possible to argue that the author devised that scheme as a means for giving interest and a certain continuity to things which he had already written but which were not in circulation.

Whatever the impulse or reason may have been, he turned suddenly aside at the age of fifty from the path of poetry which up to then he had been following and founded a new type of writing, that concerned with the observation and delineation of character which in one form or another, whether as the drama or the novel, has been the chief and peculiar characteristic of English literature since.

A study of a book so large and various is outside

the scope of an essay of this kind, but it is worth while observing before we leave it, how closely the scheme of the *Canterbury Tales* approaches that of the later novel of adventure. Had Chaucer's dealings with his characters stopped with the prologue, he would have given us a masterly piece of observation of contemporary social types which has no parallel in any other country, and which includes, except royalty and nobles on the one hand and the lowest vagrants on the other, practically the whole English nation; but he would have been a long way behind the novel, because he would have given us little about the relations between the people whom he painted so well. But Chaucer's handling of his characters was not limited to these truthful and delicate descriptions. He does not pass abruptly from the portrait to the tale. "In the course of their ride he makes the pilgrims converse among themselves; he shows them calling out to each other, approving what one has said and more often still rating each other. They give their opinions on the stories that have been told, and these comments reveal their dominant thought, their feelings, and the objects of their interest. A sort of comedy is being enacted through the poem which binds together the various parts. It is only just outlined, it is true, but it suffices to show the intentions and comic powers of the author. The gentle knight soothes the angry ones with grave and courteous words.

Some pilgrims, whose natures or occupations place them at enmity, exchange high words and nearly come to blows. The sturdy Miller and the slender Reve rail at each other; the Friar quarrels with the Somnour. First the Miller and then the Cook get drunk. The Pardoner and the Wife of Bath each deliver interminable discourses before coming to their stories. The prologues and epilogues constantly bring back the attention from the tales to the pilgrims, who narrate them or listen to them. In this way the characters who were first described by the poet reveal themselves yet again by their words and actions."[1] The *Canterbury Tales*, that is to say, are on the way towards a novel of the type of the *Pickwick Papers*, the kind of novel in which a series of sharply defined characters pass through amusing or exciting adventures, commonly strung on a journey as the connecting thread. In the nineteenth-century book some of the characters tell stories even as they do in the *Canterbury Tales*, but the stories have ceased to be the main thing. Chaucer, on the other hand, though he went far, hardly went so far as involving the pilgrims in a plot of their own. But for all that, the resemblances between the two are greater than the differences, and across nearly five centuries Chaucer and Dickens join hands.

[1] *Chaucer*, by Professor Legouis, a book to which I am indebted for many of the opinions expressed in this chapter.

(2)

Of Chaucer's contemporaries and immediate successors in England little need be said. The greater of his two contemporaries, William Langland, author of the *Vision of Piers Plowman*, was a solitary genius, writing in an old-fashioned metre, the last of the old English, having no relation to what came after him. With the other of them, John Gower, the case is different. For all the mediævalism of his subjects and the sources from which he drew them, he remains an essentially modern writer—always metrical and smooth and graceful, but lacking in definiteness and strength, and, above all, wanting in compression and in the dramatic gift of telling a story with terseness and point. His work belongs to that type of literature of which examples are to be found in minor Elizabethan sonnet-writing and, later, pre-eminently, in the work of the lesser eighteenth-century poets, in which the qualities of ease and fluency and grace are caught from greater work near it, but in which nothing is achieved beyond urbanity and smoothness, which gives nothing to the intellect of the reader and asks no service of it in return. Gower was a man of literary capacity without genius; Langland had genius without much literary capacity; Chaucer had both, and therefore what he did lives at the expense of the other two. Yet it would be a mistake to undervalue

Gower too much, particularly since Lydgate and Occleve, his and Chaucer's immediate successors in England, utterly failed to come up to his achievement. "If there had been no Chaucer, Gower would have had a respectable place in history as the one 'correct' poet of the Middle Ages, as the English culmination of that courtly mediæval poetry which had its rise in France and Provence two or three hundred years before. The prize for style would have been awarded to Gower; as it is, he deserves rather more consideration than he has generally received in modern times. It is easy to pass him over and to say that his correctness is flat, his poetical art monotonous. But at the very lowest valuation, he did what no one else except Chaucer was able to do: he wrote a large amount of verse in perfect accordance with his critical principles, in such a way as to stand minute examination; and in this he thoroughly expressed the good manners of his time. He proved that English might compete with the languages which had most distinguished them in poetry. Chaucer did as much; and in his earlier work he did no more than Gower."[1] That from his best critic is the most that can be said for him; it may be recorded in support of it that from the day of his death in 1408 till Sackville and perhaps Spenser, no one attained the same perfection of method in English verse.

[1] Prof. W. P. Ker.

Chaucer's English successors, Lydgate and Occleve, Skelton and Hawes, have a certain historical interest in that they did indubitably, during the course of the fifteenth century (a period too troubled politically in England to have much energy for literature), write certain works which keep the chain of the production of verse unbroken from the *Canterbury Tales* to the publication of the *Induction* to the *Mirror for Magistrates* and Tottel's *Miscellany*. But Chaucer's influence in his own country did not come to its own till the publication of the last-mentioned book. Surrey and Wyatt, and those who worked with them, are his true English inheritors, using his ideas, his phrases, his conventions, and very often his actual words, and handing on the best part of his bequests to them as gifts to Spenser, who himself went back and drew further from the riches of the original estate. The earliest and greatest school of Chaucerians flourished not in England but in Scotland, and to them for a moment we must turn.

Whether the first of the four great Scottish poets was or was not James I. of Scotland has been a question recently much debated by literary historians. What is certain is, that the first great Scottish poem is the *King's Quair* (*i.e.* "King's Book"), and that the title, the earliest manuscript, the word of historians in the century following its composition, and the universal witness of tradition,

agree in crediting him with the authorship. Whoever wrote it (and we should give our vote for the King himself) was under the first freshness of the Chaucerian influence. Unlike Gavin Douglas and Dunbar, and in a lesser degree Henryson, who followed him, James writes not in the peculiar literary Scots (never completely a spoken language), but in the dialect which Chaucer himself wrote. He uses the Chaucerian conventions—the things learned by him from the *Romance of the Rose*—the garden, the sleep, the dream, the vision, and so on. The poem has the dreamy elegance of Chaucer's early verse; the grace which he caught from the *Romance* is a sort of fancy work, musical and sentimental, with a mythology of personified abstract qualities; a little thin and impalpable, but always graceful and always full of the freshness of springtime which seems to cling about this light and glad dawn of modern English verse.

His successor in poetry, Robert Henryson, though not the greatest poet of the period (that title belongs to Dunbar), is unquestionably the most accomplished and poetical of the Chaucerian school. Unlike James I., to whom can certainly be ascribed only the one poem, Henryson left a large body of authenticated poetry. He completed the story of Chaucer's *Troilus and Cressida* in his powerful romantic poem, *The Testament of Cressyd*; he versified in a light and critical manner Æsop's Fables; did another romantic poem, *Orpheus and*

Eurydice; and, best known of all, wrote, in the manner of the old French *pastourelle*, a shepherd's wooing ballad, *Robin and Makene*, which, from its inclusion in Percy's *Reliques*, has remained popular to our own day. The best of his works is the *Testament*, a thing worthy (and there could be no higher praise) to be set beside Chaucer's masterpiece itself. To Saturn and the Moon is referred by the gods the punishment which Cressyd's faithlessness shall receive, and they decree leprosy. Struck with the terrible disease, she goes out with a clapper and a dish to beg for food. As she stands waiting at the roadside, a gallant company rides out from Troy, Troilus among them. Their eyes meet, but her dim vision cannot see her old lover, and it is impossible for him to see Cressyd in the ghastly creature beside his horse. She receives his alms, is told by one of his companions who he is, utters a last complaint, and, having sent her ring to him for remembrance, dies. These two passages—that in which Saturn pronounces judgment and that describing the lovers' meeting—are as near perfection as they could be; Chaucer himself did nothing better at his best. They touch the highest point, after him, in the tragic and pathetic qualities of his narrative style.

The greatest of this group, William Dunbar, is unquestionably the greatest Scottish poet before Burns, and perhaps the greatest of them all. No one of his time, except Villon, has the same vigour

of expression, and the same hard and pungent quality of irony in his outlook; no one else can show the same range of power and the same diversity of work. Like the rest, he is a follower of Chaucer; but it is Chaucer in the mood of the *Wife of Bath's* prologue that he prefers to follow, or, if it is the Chaucer of the *Death of Blanche the Duchess*, then it is with a satirical independence of his own, so that, writing, for instance, in the latitude of Edinburgh, he will have nothing to do with May mornings and "Fresh flowers green," but embraces the east wind straight away without convention or pretence. The *Thistle and the Rose*, his most Chaucerian poem, written to welcome Queen Margaret, daughter of Henry VII., to Scotland, is written gracefully and with spirit and good sense. The *Two Married Women and the Widow* (one is conscious of a loss in modernising the spelling of Dunbar's titles) has enormous vigour and high spirits and a complete accomplishment of form that beats all his contemporaries. Like his *Dance of the Seven Deadly Sins*, which has a lurid strength unattainable by Lydgate and Occleve, his English contemporaries, the *Two Married Women* has its unpleasant side. The Wife of Bath was at least good-natured. "Dunbar's wives and widow combine sensuality with ill-nature in a way not to be paralleled in English literature till we come to the relics of the Restoration." Their ugliness is swallowed in the mastery with which their portraiture is accom-

plished. Not till some of Shakespeare's or Ben Jonson's pieces of low life is there anything in English writing half so good.

(3)

But though Chaucer's followers help to bridge the gap between him and the Elizabethans, the main stream of English poetry passed into other and obscurer channels. The origin and composition of English ballad literature has always been, and no doubt will always be, a matter of fierce critical controversy, but it is agreed by those who have most carefully studied them, that it was in the fifteenth century that the popular and romantic ballads as we know them first took their shape. The oldest of them, *The Hunting of the Cheviot*, was probably composed as early as 1400, the year of Chaucer's death ; and whatever previous shapes they may have worn, the great poems in this kind in their present form are subsequent to that date. This theory corresponds to what we can glean from external evidence, but, indeed, the ballads bear marks themselves which support it. They belong to a period when modern English as we know it was, roughly speaking, formed ; the absence of inflexion gives a backward date, and that date cannot be further back than the fifteenth century. They belong, no less certainly, to a period when oral transmission was still a normal way of preserving poetry, and that cannot be later than early in the sixteenth century.

With the coming of the printed broadsheet, as we shall see, the romantic ballad died, and the occasional ballad was born. A form of poetry which had till then been valued because it was old, became despised unless it was new, and the ballad form, degraded till it did no more than serve more or less metrically the uses of sensational journalism, had to wait till the end of the eighteenth century before it was used again for literary purposes. When it was taken up again it was consciously "literary" and no longer "popular," but the men of letters who used it could find no better model than that left them by the anonymous and co-operative authors whose work has survived.

It is necessary to use the word "co-operative," because it is plain that no ballad as it has come down to us is the unaltered and final work of one man; but it must not be taken to imply adherence to the curious theory of communal composition advanced by some anthropologists, and fortified by them with examples from the practices and rituals of savage tribes, ancient and modern, in both hemispheres. Poetry does not write itself, and the fancied picture of a community sitting round a village or camp fire and evolving, verse about, a ballad of the kind we know, remains a picture of the fancy only. What in the first instance a minstrel, bard, or troubadour devised and sang, popular fancy, taking hold of, moulded and altered, consciously and unconsciously, each man who memorised it

adding his share of romance or fancy, and all the time that great instrument and artifice of literature, the human memory, transmuting it unconsciously —taking a verse from one poem and adding it to another, so that scores of ballads have recurring parts in common—lightening its own burden by the use of set and conventional phrases, planing away roughnesses of metre and diction till the whole thing came easily along the channels of the brain and sped flowingly from the tongue. Who the original authors were must remain for ever unknown, though some of the ballads are no doubt popular forms, wrought by the process indicated, from written metrical romances of the type of *King Horn*, which got into the hands of wandering singers, and from them to the people at large. It must have been the process of popular transmission which gave their work the character which we know. If one asks oneself what it is that gives the ballads their unique attractiveness, what it is that still makes them stir us as they did Sir Philip Sidney, as the sound of a trumpet, the answer is plain; it is not the things wherein they differ, like their plots, but the things which they have in common. It may be lines like this:—

> "Then he pulled forth his bright brown sword
> And dried it on his sleeve";

or this:—

> "He hadna ridden a mile, a mile,
> A mile or barely three";

or this :—

"Lord William was buried in St Mary's kirk,
Lady Margaret in Mary's quire,
Out o' the lady's grave grew a bonny red rose
And out o' the knight's a briar";

all of which occur in more than one ballad, and all but the first two lines of the last in several. Or it may be things which, if they cannot be matched word for word from one ballad to another, still breathe a common spirit. They are the things which, as it were, express "idea" (in the Platonic sense) of a ballad—things like

"Is there ony room at your head, Saunders?
Is there ony room at your feet?
Or ony room at your side, Saunders,
Where fain, fain, I wad sleep?"

or like

"Half-oure, half-oure to Aberdour,
'Tis fifty fathoms deep;
And there lies gude Sir Patrick Spens,
Wi' the Scots lords at his feet";

or this, with its quintessential fragrance of romance :—

"May Margaret sits in her bower door
Sewing her silken seam;
She heard a note in Elmond's wood,
And wish'd she there had been.

"She loot the seam fa' frae her side,
The needle to her tae,
And she is on to Elmond's wood
As fast as she could gae."

These things, and the ballads which enshrine them, have only to be compared with a typical late metrical romance for the reader to see at once the superiority in romantic glamour, in narrative skill, in metrical lilt and felicity, of the popular poem, the fashioning of which was co-operative, over the product, written immediately and therefore fixed in form once and for all, of a single (and average) mind. For the authorship of a ballad, if only it were left to oral transmission, never ceased. No new possessor of it but, in getting it by heart, might add, all unsuspecting, some new fineness or wipe away some flaw.

The metrical romance was written; it could not be easily or quickly spread or duplicated save by word of mouth, and oral transmission, as we have seen, served it well. The invention of printing meant the cheap and unlimited multiplication of popular poetry (story-telling, that is, without a consciously artistic end), in the form in which it was first written, and printing killed the ballad almost as soon as it came. Where the broadside went there was no more need for singing or reciting; ballads could be read more quickly than they could be heard or learned. The appetite for them increased and the supply kept pace with the increase; thousands of broadside ballads poured from the press. Unlike the older oral ballads, which were concerned with romance or tradition, the printed ballads sought news. They

were, or pretended to be, matters of fact, carrying as often as not the date of the occurrence they commemorated on their face. *Glasgerion*, *Clerk Saunders*, *Chevy Chase*, and *The Demon Lover* slipped quietly down into the underworld of the antiquaries, not to be fished out again for two hundred years. In their place came ballads of hangings, highwaymen, religious conversions, monstrous births, and all the stock-in-trade of Autolycus and his kind. So the ballad passed out of literature.

(4)

Chaucer and his followers and the ballad-makers between them are the fount from which modern English poetry springs; it is not till a hundred years or so after Chaucer's death that we come upon the beginnings of English prose. Chaucer's own exercises in prose are poor; they spring not from his love of literature, but from his love of learning—are either sermons like the *Parson's Tale*, or translations of popular philosophy like his *Boece*, or treatises on popular science like that on the Astrolabe, done for "little Lewis, my son." He was not interested, one feels, in prose style (though curiously the tale he tells himself in the Canterbury pilgrimage is in this medium), and this lack of interest probably arose from the fact that he had before him no models as he had in poetry on which to form what he wrote. Good prose began to be

written in England a century after him as the result of three influences, one of a fresh subject-matter and the other two opposite literary impulses, which ultimately turned side by side and combined with each other. There was the impulse to copy the newly found masterpieces of classical literature in an English dress, and there was the impulse which feared that as a result of this the Anglo-Saxon purity of the national tongue was being put in danger, and strove to avert the evil by putting native English, as distinct from latinised English, on its own legs.

The Renaissance reached England late. By the time its triumph was at its height in the work of Spenser and Shakespeare, it had died out in Italy, and in France, to which in turn Italy had passed the torch, it was already a warning fire. When it came to England, it came in a special form shaped by political and social conditions. Hardly had the forces of secular culture been mobilised by the leaders in the van—men like Grocyn and Linacre and Colet—when at their heels came the heralds of religious revolt. Linacre and Colet were schoolmasters who wanted to do no more than plant the new classical learning in England. They cared for the graces of latinity, for the study of rhetoric, wished that their pupils might write Latin like Cicero, and English like him too. But the newly found books set men not only trying to write like them, but, what was more

dangerous, think like them. Erasmus carried the solvent of his learning across the Channel to this country. Men began to think for themselves on the dogmas they had accepted unquestioningly, and the Reformation, on the side of thought (not of ecclesiastical politics), got its first impetus. To Erasmus and his teaching we must put down the work of men like Sir John Cheke, Sir Thomas Wilson, and Roger Ascham. To the earlier group, interested mainly in literary things, or, if in religious and philosophical, not anxious to break with orthodoxy, we can fairly attach the work of Sir Thomas More.

His *Utopia*, based as it is on Plato's *Republic*, is the earliest fruit of the most lasting impulse in the Renaissance study of the subject-matter of Latin and Greek literature—the impulse given by the political speculation of the ancients, which reappears in late books like Harrington's *Oceana* and Bacon's *New Atlantis*, and, in a different form, in the translations from Plutarch, in essays like Montaigne's and Bacon's, and in the constant political allusions and theorisings which are to be found in plays. In one way or another, the rediscovery of Plato proved the most valuable part of the Renaissance's gift from Greece. The doctrines of the Symposium coloured in Italy the writings of Castiglione and Mirandula. In England they gave us Spenser's *Hymn of Heavenly Beauty*, and they affected, each in his own way, Sir Philip Sidney and

others of the circle of court writers of his time. More's book was written in Latin, though there is an English translation almost contemporary. He combines in himself a strain drawn from the active side of the Renaissance as well as from the studious, for besides its origin in Plato, *Utopia* owes not a little to the influence of the voyages of discovery. In 1507 there was published a little book called *An Introduction to Cosmography*, which gave an account of the four voyages of Amerigo. In the story of the fourth voyage it is narrated that twenty-four men were left in a fort near Cape Bahia. More used this detail as a starting-point, and one of the men whom Amerigo left tells the story of this "Nowhere," a republic mostly resembling the ideal world of Plato, but largely studied from and contrasted with contemporary England. It is the same in all books of this kind, because no man can escape from the influence of his own time whatever road he takes, whether the road of imagination or any other. His imagination can only build out of the materials afforded him by his own experience; he can alter, he can rearrange, but he cannot in the strictest sense of the word create, and every city of dreams is only the scheme of things as they are remoulded nearer to the desire of a man's heart. In a way, More has less invention than some of his subtler followers, but, like them, he excels best where he is most satirical. Utopias are interesting most to us when they give us new eyes to see things as

they are. This—the first of many in England—is no exception to the rule.

The followers of Erasmus link themselves more closely with the great age of English prose which followed, and the lives of many of them go on well into Elizabeth's reign. Sir Thomas Wilson, who translated Demosthenes and wrote a famous text-book of rhetoric, was one of her secretaries of state. Roger Ascham wrote his *Toxophilus*—a dialogue on the use of the bow, done on a classical model—while Henry VIII. was still on the throne, and did not finish his *Schoolmaster* till ten years after Elizabeth's accession. But literature as it developed in the reign of Elizabeth ran the other way from their desires and hopes. The men of the earlier Renaissance, in the reign of Edward VI. and Mary, belonged to a graver school than their successors. They were no splendid courtiers, nor daring and hardy adventurers, still less swash-bucklers, exquisites, or literary dandies. Their names—Sir John Cheke, Roger Ascham, Nicholas Udall, Thomas Wilson, Walter Haddon—belong rather to the universities and to the coteries of learning than to the court. To the nobility, from whose essays in *belles lettres* Elizabethan poetry was to develop, they stood in the relation of tutors rather than of companions, suspecting the extravagances of their pupils rather than sympathising with their ideals. They were a band of serious and dignified scholars, men preoccupied with

morality and good citizenship, and holding these to be worth more than the lighter interests of learning and style. It is perhaps characteristic of the English temper that the revival of the classical tongues, which in Italy made for paganism and the pursuit of pleasure in life and art, in England brought with it a new seriousness and gravity in life and art, and in religion the Reformation. But in a way, the scholars fought against tendencies in their age which were both too fast and too strong for them. At a time when young men were writing poetry modelled on the delicate and extravagant verse of Italy, were reading Italian novels, and affecting Italian fashions in speech and dress, they were fighting for sound education, for good classical scholarship, for the purity of native English, and, behind all these, for the native strength and worth of the English character, which they felt to be endangered by orgies of reckless assimilation from abroad. The revival of the classics at Oxford and Cambridge could not produce an Erasmus or a Scaliger; we have no fine critical scholarship of this age to put beside that of Holland or France. Sir John Cheke and his followers felt they had a public and national duty to perform, and their knowledge of the classics only served them for examples of high living and morality, on which education, in its sense of the formation of character, could be based.

In the work of these men, as we have said, two

impulses fought with each other. The reading of Cicero intoxicated men with a new full-mouthed and decorative language unknown to English at that date. Latinism, like every new craze, became a passion, and ran through the less intelligent kinds of writing in a wild excess. Not much of the literature of this time remains in common knowledge, and for examples of these affectations one must turn over the pages of forgotten books. There high-sounding and familiar words are handled and bandied about with delight, and you can see in volume after volume these minor and forgotten authors gloating over the new-found treasure which placed them in their time in the van of literary success. That they are obsolete now, and indeed were obsolete before they were dead, is a warning to authors who intend similar extravagances. Strangeness and exoticism are not lasting wares. By the time of *Love's Labour's Lost* they had become nothing more than matter for laughter, and it is only through their reflection and distortion in Shakespeare's pages that we know them now.

Had not a restraining influence, anxiously and even acrimoniously urged, broken in on their endeavours, the English language to-day might have been almost as completely latinised as Spanish or Italian. That the essential Saxon purity of our tongue has been preserved is to the credit not of sensible unlettered people eschewing new fashions

they could not comprehend, but to the scholars themselves. The chief service that Cheke and Ascham and their fellows rendered to English literature was their crusade against the exaggerated latinity that they had themselves helped to make possible, the crusade against what they called "inkhorn terms." "I am of this opinion," said Cheke in a prefatory letter to a book translated by a friend of his, "that our own tongue should be written clean and pure, unmixed and unmangled with the borrowing of other tongues, wherein if we take not heed by time, ever borrowing and never paying, she shall be fain to keep her house as bankrupt." Writings in the Saxon vernacular, like the sermons of Latimer, who was careful to use nothing not familiar to the common people, did much to help the scholars to save our prose from the extravagances which they dreaded. Their attack was directed no less against the revival of really obsolete words. It is a paradox worth noting for its strangeness that the first revival of mediævalism in modern English literature was in the Renaissance itself. Talking in studious archaism seems to have been a fashionable practice in society and court circles. "The fine courtier," says Thomas Wilson in his *Art of Rhetoric*, "will talk nothing but Chaucer." The scholars of the English Renaissance fought not only against the ignorant adoption of their importations, but against their renewal of forgotten habits of speech.

Their efforts failed, and their ideals had to wait for their acceptance till the age of Dryden, when Shakespeare and Spenser and Milton, all of them authors who consistently violated the standards of Cheke, had done their work. The fine courtier who would talk nothing but Chaucer was in Elizabeth's reign the saving of English verse. The beauty and richness of Spenser is based directly on words he got from *Troilus and Cressida* and the *Canterbury Tales*. Some of the most sonorous and beautiful lines in Shakespeare break every canon laid down by the humanists.

> "The extravagant and erring spirit hies
> To his confine"

is a sentence, three of the chief words of which are Latin importations that come unfamiliarly, bearing their original interpretation with them. In attacking latinisms and the language borrowed from older poets, Cheke and his associates were attacking the two chief sources of the Elizabethans' poetic vocabulary. All the sonorousness, beauty, and dignity of the poetry and the drama which followed them would have been lost had they succeeded in their object, and their verse would have been constrained into the warped and ugly forms of Sternhold and Hopkins and those with them who composed the first and worst metrical version of the psalms. When their ideal reappeared, phantasy and imagery had temporarily worn themselves out, and a richer language made simplicity possible in poetry.

Chaucer went to Italy for the plots of his greatest stories; the English scholars travelled there to imbibe the new learning at its spring. There resulted a circumstance which had a marked and continuous influence on the literary age that followed. On the heels of the men of learning went the men of fashion, eager to learn and copy the new manners of a society whose moral teacher was Machiavelli, and whose patterns of splendour were the courts of Florence and Ferrara, and to learn the trick of verse that in the hands of Petrarch and his followers had fashioned the sonnet and other new lyric forms. This could not be without its influence on the manners of the nation, and the scholars who had been the first to show the way were the first to deplore the pell-mell assimilation of Italian manners and vices, which was the unintended result of the inroad on insularity which had already begun. They saw the danger ahead, and they laboured to meet it as it came. Ascham in his *Schoolmaster* railed against the translation of Italian books, and the corrupt manner of living and false ideas which they seemed to him to breed. The Italianate Englishman became the chief part of the stock-in-trade of the satirists and moralists of the day. Stubbs, a Puritan chronicler, whose book *The Anatomy of Abuses* is a valuable aid to the study of Tudor social history, and Harrison, whose description of England prefaces Holinshed's Chronicles,

both deal in detail with the Italian menace, and condemn in good set terms the costliness in dress and the looseness in morals which they laid to its charge. Indeed, the effect on England was profound, and it lasted for more than two generations. The romantic traveller, Coryat, writing well within the seventeenth century in praise of the luxuries of Italy (among which he numbers forks for table use), is as enthusiastic as the authors who began the imitation of Italian metres in Tottel's *Miscellany*, and Donne and Hall in their satires written under James wield the rod of censure as sternly as had Ascham a good half-century before. No doubt there was something in the danger they dreaded, but the evil was not unmixed with good, for insularity will always be an enemy of good literature. The Elizabethans learned much more than their plots from Italian models, and the worst effects dreaded by the patriots never reached our shores. Italian vice stopped short of real life; poisoning and hired ruffianism flourished only on the stage.

CHAPTER II

ELIZABETHAN POETRY AND PROSE

(1)

To understand Elizabethan literature it is necessary to remember that the social status it enjoyed was far different from that of literature in our own day. The splendours of the Medicis in Italy had set up an ideal of courtliness, in which letters formed an integral and indispensable part. For the Renaissance, the man of letters was only one aspect of the gentleman, and the true gentleman, as books so early and late respectively as Castiglione's *Courtier* and Peacham's *Complete Gentleman* show, numbered poetry as a necessary part of his accomplishments. In England special circumstances intensified this tendency of the time. The queen was unmarried: she was the first single woman to wear the English crown, and her vanity made her value the devotion of the men about her as something more intimate than mere loyalty or patriotism. She loved personal homage, particularly the homage of half-amatory eulogy in prose and verse. It followed that the ambition of every courtier was to be an author, like Lord Buckhurst and Sir Philip Sidney, and of every author to be a courtier, like

Edmund Spenser and John Lyly; in fact, outside the drama, which was almost the only popular writing at the time, every author was in a greater or less degree attached to the court. If they were not enjoying its favours they were pleading for them, mingling high and fantastic compliment with bitter reproaches and a tale of misery. And consequently both the poetry and the prose of the time are restricted in their scope and temper to the artificial and romantic, to high-flown eloquence, to the celebration of love and devotion, or to the inculcation of those courtly virtues and accomplishments which composed the perfect pattern of a gentleman. Not that there was not both poetry and prose written outside this charmed circle. The pamphleteers and chroniclers, Dekker and Nash, Holinshed and Harrison and Stow, were setting down their histories and descriptions, and penning those detailed and realistic indictments of the follies and extravagances of fashion, which together with the comedies have enabled us to picture accurately the England and especially the London of Elizabeth's reign. There was fine poetry written by Marlowe and Chapman as well as by Sidney and Spenser, but the court was still the main centre of literary endeavour, and the main incitement to literary fame and success.

But whether an author was a courtier or a Londoner living by his wits, writing was never the main business of his life: all the writers of the

time were in one way or another men of action and affairs. As late as Milton it is probably true to say that writing was in the case even of the greatest an avocation, something indulged in at leisure outside a man's main business. All the Elizabethan authors had crowded and various careers. Of Sir Philip Sidney his earliest biographer, Lord Greville, says, "The truth is, his end was not writing, even while he wrote, but both his wit and understanding bent upon his heart to make himself and others not in words or opinion but in life and action good and great." Ben Jonson was in turn a soldier, a poet, a bricklayer, an actor, and ultimately the first poet laureate. Lodge, after leaving Oxford, passed through the various professions of soldiering, medicine, playwriting, and fiction, and he wrote his novel *Rosalind*, on which Shakespeare based *As You Like It*, while he was sailing on a piratical venture on the Spanish Main. This connection between life and action affected as we have seen the tone and quality of Elizabethan writing. "All the distinguished writers of the period," says Thoreau, "possess a greater vigour and naturalness than the more modern . . . you have constantly the warrant of life and experience in what you read. The little that is said is eked out by implication of the much that was done." In another passage the same writer explains the strength and fineness of the writings of Sir Walter Raleigh by this very test

of action, "The word which is best said came nearest to not being spoken at all, for it is cousin to a deed which the speaker could have better done. Nay almost it must have taken the place of a deed by some urgent necessity, even by some misfortune, so that the truest writer will be some captive knight after all." This bond between literature and action explains more than the writings of the voyagers or the pamphlets of men who lived in London by what they could make off their fellows. Literature has always a twofold relation to life as it is lived. It is both a mirror and an escape: in our own day the stirring romances of Stevenson, the full-blooded and vigorous life which beats through the pages of Mr Kipling, the conscious brutalism of such writers as Mr Conrad and Mr Hewlett, the plays of J. M. Synge, occupied with the vigorous and coarse-grained life of tinkers and peasants, are all in their separate ways a reaction against an age in which the overwhelming majority of men and women have sedentary pursuits. In the same way the Elizabethan who passed his commonly short and crowded life in an atmosphere of throat-cutting and powder and shot, and in a time when affairs of state were more momentous for the future of the nation than they have ever been since, needed perhaps his escape from the things which pressed in upon him every day. So grew the vogue and popularity of pastoral poetry and the pastoral romance.

(2)

It is with a group of courtiers that our fifteenth-century poetry begins. In the latter end of King Henry VIII.'s reign, says Puttenham in his *Art of Poesie* (1589), there "sprang up a new company of courtly makers of whom Sir Thomas Wyatt and the Earl of Surrey were the two chieftains, who, having travelled into Italy and there tasted the sweet and stately measures and style of Italian poesie . . . they greatly polished our rude and homely manner of vulgar poesie from what it had been before, and for that cause may justly be said the first reformers of our English metres and style." They were busy men; they had no patrons to please, and they belonged to a class in which manuscript rather than print was still the normal way of putting words on paper. It was not until ten years after the death of the second of them that their poems appeared in print. The book that contained them, Tottel's *Miscellany of Songs and Sonnets* (it was published first in 1557 and went through six other editions) is one of the landmarks of English literature. It begins lyrical love poetry in our language. It begins, too, as Puttenham observes, the imitation and adaptation of foreign and chiefly Italian metrical forms, many of which have since become characteristic forms of English verse: so characteristic, that we scarcely think of them as other than native in origin. And it begins

that study of Chaucer as a master which was to produce Spenser. To Wyatt belongs the honour of introducing the sonnet, and to Surrey the more momentous credit of writing, for the first time in English, blank verse. Wyatt fills the most important place in the *Miscellany*, and his work, experimental in tone and quality, formed the example which Surrey and minor writers in the same volume and all the later poets of the age copied. He tries his hand at everything—songs, madrigals, elegies, complaints, and sonnets—and he takes his models from both ancient Rome and modern Italy. Indeed, there is scarcely anything in the volume for which with some trouble and research one might not find an original in Petrarch, or in the poets of Italy who followed him. But imitation, frequent though it is in his work, does not crowd out originality of feeling and poetic temper. At times, he sounds a personal note: his joy on leaving Spain for England, his feelings in the Tower, his life at the Court amongst his books, and as a country gentleman enjoying hunting and other outdoor sports:

> "This maketh me at home to hunt and hawk,
> And in foul weather at my book to sit,
> In frost and snow, then with my bow to stalk,
> No man does mark whereas I ride or go:
> In lusty leas at liberty I walk."

It is easy to see that poetry as a melodious and enriched expression of a man's own feelings is in its

infancy here. But it is hardly fair to judge Wyatt by this side of his work. He was happier in re-creating and putting new life into that lyrical mood which had appeared fitfully in the thirteenth century in the work of unnamed singers, but which in time to come was to be one of the chiefest glories of English verse. Such verses as

> "Forget not yet the kind intent
> Of such a truth as I have meant;
> My great travail so gladly spent
> Forget not yet!"

and those which follow it, or such lines as

> "And wilt thou leave me thus
> That hath loved thee so long
> In wealth and woe among?
> And is thy heart so strong
> As for to leave me thus?
> Say nay! Say nay!"

are a worthy prelude to the Elizabethan lyric. The new poets had to find their own language, to enrich with borrowings from other tongues the stock of words suitable for poetry which the dropping of inflection had left to English. Wyatt was at the beginning of the process, but his gracious and courtly temper and his fine sincerity of feeling give his work an interest greater than the mere pleasure of experimenting could afford.

Surrey, so it seems in comparing his work, went a step further. He allows himself oftener the luxury of a reference to personal feelings, and his poetry contains from place to place a fairly full record of

the vicissitudes of his life. A prisoner at Windsor, he recalls his childhood there:

> "The large green courts where we were wont to hove,[1]
> The palme-play, where, despoiled for the game,
> With dazzled eyes oft we by gleams of love
> Have missed the ball, and got sight of our dame."

Like Wyatt's, his verses are rough in places, but a sympathetic ear can catch in them something of the accent that distinguishes the verse of Sidney and Spenser. He is greater than Wyatt, not so much for greater skill as for more boldness in experiment. Wyatt in his sonnets had used the Petrarchan or Italian form, the form used later in England by Milton and in the nineteenth century by Rossetti. He built up each poem, that is, in two parts, the octave, a two-rhymed section of eight lines at the beginning, followed by the sestet, a six-line close with three rhymes. The form fits itself very well to the double mood which commonly inspires a poet using the sonnet form; the second section as it were both echoing and answering the first, following doubt with hope, or sadness with resignation, or resolving a problem set itself by the heart. Surrey tried another manner, the manner which by its use in Shakespeare's sonnets has come to be regarded as the English form of this kind of lyric. His sonnets are virtually three-stanza poems with a couplet for close, and he allows himself as many rhymes as he chooses.

[1] *I.e.* hover.

The structure is obviously easier, and it gives a better chance to an inferior workman, but in the hands of a master its harmonies are no less delicate, and its capacity to represent changing modes of thought no less complete than those of the true form of Petrarch. Blank verse, which was Surrey's other gift to English poetry (through his translation of the *Æneid*, published after his death in the same year as the *Songs and Sonnets* and the first verse translation[1] into English of any classical poet), was in a way a compromise between the two sources from which the English Renaissance drew its inspiration. Latin and Greek verse is quantitative and rhymeless; Italian verse, built up on the metres of the troubadours and the degeneration of Latin which gave the world the Romance languages, used many elaborate forms of rhyme. Blank verse took from Latin its rhymelessness, but it retained the mediæval accent instead of quantity as the basis of its line. Here is a favourable sample of Surrey's use of it:—

> "With this the young men's courage did increase,
> And through the dark, like to the ravening wolves
> Whom raging fury of their empty maws
> Drives to their den, leaving with hungry throats
> Their whelps behind, among our foes we ran
> Upon their swords, into apparent death,
> Holding alway the chief street of the town,
> Covered with the close shadows of the night."

[1] Strictly, the first into a British vernacular is that of the Scottish poet, Gavin Douglas, also of the *Æneid*, 1513.

The line is the five-foot or ten-syllable line of what is called "heroic verse"—the line used by Chaucer in his Prologue and most of his tales. Like Milton, Surrey deplored rhyme as the invention of a barbarous age, and no doubt he would have rejoiced to go further and banish accent as well as rhymed endings. That, however, was not to be, though in the best blank verse of a later time accent and quantity both have their share in the effect. The instrument he forged passed into the hands of the dramatists: Marlowe perfected its rhythm, Shakespeare broke its monotony and varied its cadences by altering the spacing of the accents, and occasionally by adding an extra unaccented syllable. It came back from the drama to poetry with Milton. His blindness and the necessity under which it laid him of keeping in his head long stretches of verse at one time, because he could not look back to see what he had written, probably helped his naturally quick and delicate sense of cadence to vary the pauses, so that a variety of accent and interval might replace the valuable aid to memory which he put aside in putting aside rhyme. Perhaps it is to two accidents, the accident by which blank verse as the medium of the actor had to be retained easily in the memory, and the accident of Milton's blindness, that must be laid the credit of more than a little of the richness of rhythm of this, the chief and greatest instrument of English verse.

The imitation of Chaucerian Italian and French forms which Wyatt and Surrey began, was continued by a host of younger amateurs of poetry. The first and best of them was Thomas Sackville (Lord Buckhurst), who towards the end of his life (he outlived the Queen) was to become Lord High Treasurer. His literary work was done before he entered public life, and though it is small in compass and consists indeed of no more than two poems, one narrative and the other dramatic, in its way it helped to make an epoch. *Gorboduc*, the first blank verse tragedy in our language, we shall see later when we come to deal with the drama. Sackville's other poem is the *Induction* to the *Mirror for Magistrates*, a composite poem modelled on Lydgate's *Fall of Princes* and ultimately on Boccaccio, which was designed to be for rulers and statesmen both a warning and a glass in which they should see themselves. Sackville designed the work, but after he had done the introductory portion and one of the tales, he left the completion of it to inferior hands, and strangely, the book was first published without his part of it; it was not till four years after, in 1563, that the *Induction* appeared. The scheme of the book, based on Vergil and Dante, was that the poet should descend into hell and interview the personages, who would tell their own story; Sackville's portion of it describes the descent. Since Chaucer, two hundred years back, nothing comparable had

been produced in English verse, nor can it be truly said that it is in strength and power in any way inferior to Spenser himself. The following stanza will give the reader a taste of its quality:—

"Crookbacked he was, tooth-shaken and blear-eyed;
Went on three feet, and sometimes crept on four;
With old lame bones, that rattled by his side;
His scalp all piled, and he with eld forelore,
His withered fist still knocking at death's door;
Fumbling and drivelling as he draws his breath;
For brief, the shape and messenger of death."

The *Induction* runs to eighty stanzas, and it maintains to the end the level at which it began. When it ended Sackville put down his pen, and, so far as we know, throughout his long life never, save to sign a state paper, took it up again.

Sackville followed Chaucer; his contemporaries busied themselves with Petrarch and his school. Laborious research has found a Continental original for almost every great poem of the time, and for very many forgotten ones as well. It is easy for the student engaged in this kind of literary exploration to exaggerate the importance of what he finds, and of late years criticism, written mainly by these explorers, has tended to assume that since it can be found that Sidney, and Daniel, and Watson, and all the other writers of mythological poetry and sonnet sequences took their ideas and their phrases from foreign poetry, their work is therefore to be classed merely as imitative literary exercise, that it is frigid, that it contains or conveys no real

feeling, and that except in the secondary and derived sense, it is not really lyrical at all. Petrarch, they will tell you, may have felt deeply and sincerely about Laura, but when Sidney uses Petrarch's imagery and even translates his words in order to express his feelings for Stella, he is only a plagiarist and not a lover, and the passion for Lady Rich which is supposed to have inspired his sonnets, nothing more than a not too seriously intended trick to add the excitement of a transcript of real emotion to what was really an academic exercise. If that were indeed so, then Elizabethan poetry is a very much lesser and meaner thing than later ages have thought it. But is it so? Let us look into the matter a little more closely. The unit of all ordinary kinds of writing is the word, and one is not commonly quarrelled with for using words that have belonged to other people. But the unit of the lyric, like the unit of spoken conversation, is not the word but the phrase. Now in daily human intercourse the use, which is universal and habitual, of set forms and phrases of talk is not commonly supposed to detract from or destroy sincerity. In the crises indeed of emotion it must be most people's experience that the natural speech that rises unbidden and easiest to the lips is something quite familiar and commonplace, some form which the accumulated experience of many generations of separate people has found best for such circumstances or such an occasion. The lyric is in the

position of conversation at such a heightened and emotional moment. It is the speech of deep feeling, that must be articulate or choke, and it falls naturally and inevitably into some form which accumulated passionate moments have created and fixed. The course of emotional experiences differs very little from age to age and from individual to individual, and so the same phrases may be used quite sincerely and naturally as the direct expression of feeling at its highest point by men apart in country, circumstances, or time. This is not to say that there is no such thing as originality; a poet is a poet first and most of all because he discovers truths that have been known for ages, as things that are fresh and new and vital for himself. He must speak of them in language that has been used by other men just because they are known truths, but he will use that language in a new way, and with a new significance, and it is just in proportion to the freshness, and the air of personal conviction and sincerity which he imparts to it, that he is great.

The point at issue bears very directly on the work of Sir Philip Sidney. In the course of the history of English letters certain authors disengage themselves who have more than a merely literary position: they are symbolic of the whole age in which they live, its life and action, its thoughts and ideals, as well as its mere modes of writing. There are not many of them, and they could be easily

numbered: Addison, perhaps, certainly Dr Johnson, certainly Byron, and in the later age probably Tennyson. But the greatest of them all is Sir Philip Sidney: his symbolical relation to the time in which he lived was realized by his contemporaries, and it has been a commonplace of history and criticism ever since. Elizabeth called him one of the jewels of her crown, and at the age of twenty-three, so fast did genius ripen in that summer-time of the Renaissance, William the Silent could speak of him as "one of the ripest statesmen of the age." He travelled widely in Europe, knew many languages, and dreamed of adventure in America and on the high seas. In a court of brilliant figures, his was the most dazzling, and his death at Zutphen only served to intensify the halo of romance which had gathered round his name. So far as we can guess, all his literary work was done in four short years, 1578–1582; but its bulk is such that even a man of his burning vitality cannot have been long idle from it. In prose he wrote the *Arcadia* and the *Apology for Poetry*, the one the beginning of a new kind of imaginative writing, and the other the first of the series of those rare and precious commentaries on their own art which some of our English poets have left us. To it and the *Arcadia* we shall have to return later in this chapter. It is his other great work, the sequence of sonnets entitled *Astrophel and Stella*, which concerns us here. They celebrate the history of his love for Penelope

Devereux, sister of the Earl of Essex, a love brought to disaster by the intervention of Queen Elizabeth with whom he had quarrelled. As poetry, they mark an epoch. They are the first direct expression of an intimate and personal experience in English literature, struck off in the white heat of passion, and though they are coloured at times with that over-fantastic imagery which is at once a characteristic fault and excellence of the writing of the time, they never lose the one merit above all others of lyric poetry, the merit of sincerity. The note is struck with certainty and power in the first sonnet of the series:—

"Loving in truth, and fain in verse my love to show,
That she, dear she, might take some pleasure of my pain,—
Pleasure might cause her read, reading might make her know,—
Knowledge might pity win, and pity grace obtain,—
I sought fit words to paint the blackest face of woe,
Studying inventions fine her wits to entertain;
Oft turning others' leaves to see if thence would flow
Some fresh and fruitful flower upon my sunburned brain.
But words came halting forth . . .
Biting my truant pen, beating myself for spite.
'Fool,' said my muse to me, 'look in thy heart and write.'"

And though he turned others' leaves, it was quite truly looking in his heart that he wrote. He analyses the sequence of his feelings with a vividness and minuteness which assure us of their truth. All that he tells is the fruit of experience, dearly bought:

"Desire! desire! I have too dearly bought
With price of mangled mind thy worthless ware.
Too long, too long! asleep thou hast me brought,
Who shouldst my mind to higher things prepare";

and earlier in the sequence—

"I now have learned love right, and learned even so
As those that being poisoned poison know."

In the last two sonnets, with crowning truth and pathos he renounces earthly love, which reaches but to dust, and which because it fades brings but fading pleasure:

"Then farewell, world! Thy uttermost I see.
Eternal love, maintain thy life in me."

The sonnets were published after Sidney's death, and it is certain that like Shakespeare's they were never intended for publication at all. The point is important because it helps to vindicate Sidney's sincerity, but were any vindication needed another more certain might be found. The *Arcadia* is strewn with love songs and sonnets, the exercises solely of the literary imagination. Let anyone who wishes to gauge the sincerity of the impulse of the Stella sequence compare any of the poems in it with those in the romance. One thing they plainly show: had Sidney lived he would have done things which must have set him on a plane not inferior to that of Spenser himself, and he would have had his hand, one knows not to what great purpose, in the shaping of English poetry. When Zutphen cut short his career, nothing of Spenser had appeared save the *Shepherd's Calendar*; Shakespeare was

known only as the author of *Venus and Adonis*; the drama had not shouldered itself to the forefront of letters. Would Sidney have turned his hand to writing in an art which his class only patronized?

With Sidney literature was an avocation, constantly indulged in, but outside the main business of his life; with Edmund Spenser public life and affairs were subservient to an overmastering poetic impulse. He did his best to carve out a career for himself like other young men of his time, followed the fortunes of the Earl of Leicester, sought desperately and unavailingly the favour of the Queen, and ultimately accepted a place in her service in Ireland, which meant banishment as virtually as a place in India would to-day. Henceforward his visits to London and the Court were few; sometimes a lover of travel would visit him in his house in Ireland as Raleigh did, but for the most he was left alone. It was in this atmosphere of loneliness and separation, hostile tribes pinning him in on every side, murder lurking in the woods and marshes round him, that he composed his greatest work. In it at last he died, on the heels of a sudden rising in which his house was burnt and his lands overrun by the wild Irish whom the tyranny of the English planters had driven to vengeance. Spenser was not without interest in his public duties; his *View of the State of Ireland* shows that. But it shows, too, that he brought to them singularly little sympathy or imagination.

Throughout his tone is that of an unimaginative kind of English officialdom; rigid subjection and in the last resort massacre are the remedies he would apply to Irish discontent. He would be a fine text—which might perhaps be enforced by modern examples—for a discourse on the evil effects of immersion in the government of a subject race upon men of letters. No man of action perhaps can be so consistently and cynically an advocate of tyranny as your man of letters. Spenser, of course, had his excuses; the problem of Ireland was new and it was something remote and difficult; in all but the mere distance for travel, Dublin was as far from London as Bombay is to-day. But to him and his like we must lay down partly the fact that to-day we have still an Irish problem.

But though fate and the necessity of a livelihood drove him to Ireland and the life of a colonist, poetry was his main business. He had been the centre of a brilliant set at Cambridge, one of those coteries whose fame, if they are brilliant and vivacious enough and have enough self-confidence, penetrates to the outer world before they leave the University. The thing happens in our own day, as the case of Oscar Wilde is witness; it happened in the case of Spenser; and when he and his friends Gabriel Harvey and Edward Kirke came "down" it was to immediate fame amongst amateurs of the arts. They corresponded with each other about literary matters, and Harvey

published his part of the correspondence; they played, like Du Bellay in France, with the idea of writing English verse in the quantitative measures of classical poetry; Spenser had a love affair in Yorkshire and wrote poetry about it, letting just enough be known to stimulate the imagination of the public. They tried their hands at everything, imitated everything, and in all were brilliant, sparkling, and decorative; they got a kind of entrance to the circle of the Court. Then Spenser published his *Shepherd's Calendar*, a series of pastoral eclogues for every month of the year, after a manner taken from French and Italian pastoral writers, but coming ultimately from Vergil, and Edward Kirke furnished it with an elaborate prose commentary. Spenser took the same liberties with the pastoral form as did Vergil himself; that is to say, he used it as a vehicle for satire and allegory, made it carry political and social allusions, and planted in it references to his friends. By its publication Spenser became the first poet of the day. It was followed by some of his finest and most beautiful things — by the Platonic hymns, by the *Amoretti*, a series of sonnets inspired by his love for his wife; by the *Epithalamium*, on the occasion of his marriage to her; by *Mother Hubbard's Tale*, a satire written when despair at the coldness of the Queen and the enmity of Burleigh was beginning to take hold on the poet, and endowed with a plainness and vigour

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foreign to most of his other work; and then by *The Faerie Queen.*

The poets of the Renaissance were not afraid of big things; every one of them had in his mind as the goal of poetic endeavour the idea of the heroic poem, aimed at doing for his own country what Vergil had intended to do for Rome in the *Æneid*, to celebrate it—its origin, its prowess, its greatness, and the causes of it—in epic verse. Milton, three-quarters of a century later, turned over in his mind the plan of an English epic on the wars of Arthur, and when he left it, it was only to forsake the singing of English origins for the more ultimate theme of the origins of mankind. Spenser designed to celebrate the character, the qualities, and the training of the English gentleman. And because poetry, unlike philosophy, cannot deal with abstractions but must be vivid and concrete, he was forced to embody his virtues and foes to virtue and to use the way of allegory. His outward plan, with its knights and dragons and desperate adventures, he procured from Ariosto. As for the use of allegory, it was one of the discoveries of the Middle Ages which the Renaissance condescended to retain. Spenser elaborated it beyond the wildest dreams of those students of Holy Writ who had first conceived it. His stories were to be interesting in themselves as tales of adventure, but within them they were to conceal an intricate treatment of the conflict of truth and falsehood in morals

and religion. A character might typify at once Protestantism and England and Elizabeth and chastity and half the cardinal virtues, and it would have all the while the objective interest attaching to it as part of a story of adventure. All this must have made the poem difficult enough. Spenser's manner of writing it made it worse still. One is familiar with the type of novel which only explains itself when the last chapter is reached—Stevenson's *Wrecker* is an example. *The Faerie Queen* was designed on somewhat the same plan. The last section was to relate and explain the unrelated and unexplained books which made up the poem, and at the court to which the separate knights of the separate books—the Red Cross Knight and the rest—were to bring the fruit of their adventures, everything was to be made clear. Spenser did not live to finish his work ; *The Faerie Queen*, like the *Æneid*, is an uncompleted poem, and it is only from a prefatory letter to Sir Walter Raleigh issued with the second published section that we know what the poem was intended to be. Had Spenser not published this explanation, it is impossible that anybody, even the acutest-minded German professor, could have guessed.

The poem, as we have seen, was composed in Ireland, in the solitude of a colonist's plantation, and the author was shut off from his fellows while he wrote. The influence of his surroundings is visible in the writing. The elaboration of the

theme would have been impossible, or at least very unlikely, if its author had not been thrown in on himself during its composition. Its intricacy and involution is the product of an over-concentration born of empty surroundings. It lacks vigour and rapidity; it winds itself into itself. The influence of Ireland, too, is visible in its landscapes, in its description of bogs and desolation, of dark forests in which lurk savages ready to spring out on those who are rash enough to wander within their confines. All the scenery in it which is not imaginary is Irish and not English scenery. But the imaginary scenery comes straight out of the land of pure poetry.

Its reception in England and at the Court was enthusiastic. Men and women read it eagerly and longed for the next section as our grandfathers longed for the next section of *Pickwick*. They really liked it, really loved the intricacy and luxuriousness of it, the heavy exotic language, the thickly painted descriptions, the languorous melody of the verse. Mainly, perhaps, that was so because they were all either in wish or in deed poets themselves. Spenser has always been "the poet's poet." Some of them stole from him and were never caught in the stealing. One remembers what came from the following stanza in the second book of *The Faerie Queen*:—

> "So passeth, in the passing of a day
> Of mortal life, the leaf, the bud, the flower;

No more doth flourish after first decay,
That erst was sought to deck both bed and bower
Of many a lady, and many a paramour.
Gather, therefore, the Rose whilst yet is prime,
For soon comes age that will her pride deflower;
Gather the Rose of love whilst yet is time,
Whilst loving thou mayst loved be with equal crime."

Milton loved him; so did Dryden, who said that Milton confessed to him that Spenser was "his original," a statement which has been pronounced incredible, but is, in truth, perfectly comprehensible, and most likely true. Pope admired him, and was scornful when Addison hinted dispraise. Keats learned from him the best part of his music. You can trace echoes of him in Mr Yeats. What is it that gives him this hold on his peers? Well, in the first place his defects do not detract from his purely poetic qualities. The story is impossibly told, but that will only worry those who are looking for a story. The allegory is hopelessly difficult; but as Hazlitt said, "the allegory will not bite you"; you can let it alone. The crudeness and bigotry of Spenser's dealings with Catholicism, which are ridiculous when he pictures the monster Error vomiting books and pamphlets, and disgusting when he draws Mary Queen of Scots, do not hinder the pleasure of those who read him for his language and his art. He is great for other reasons than these. First because of the extraordinary smoothness and melody of his verse and the richness of his language—a golden diction

that he drew from every source—new words, old words, obsolete words—such a mixture that the purist Ben Jonson remarked acidly that he wrote no language at all. Secondly because of the profusion of his imagery, and the extraordinarily keen sense for beauty and sweetness that went to its making. In an age of golden language and gallant imagery his was the most golden and the most gallant. And the language of poetry in England is richer and more varied than that in any other country in Europe to-day, because of what he did.

(3)

Elizabethan prose brings us face to face with a difficulty which has to be met by every student of literature. Does the word "literature" cover every kind of writing? Ought we to include in it writing that aims merely at instruction or is merely journey-work, as well as writing that has an artistic intention, or writing that, whether its author knew it or no, is artistic in its result? Of course such a question causes us no sort of difficulty when it concerns itself only with what is being published to-day. We know very well that some things are literature and some merely journalism; that of novels, for instance, some deliberately intend to be works of art and others only to meet a passing desire for amusement or mental occupation. We know that most books serve or attempt to serve only a useful and not a literary purpose. But in

reading the books of three centuries ago, unconsciously one's point of view shifts. Antiquity gilds journey-work; remoteness and quaintness of phrasing lend a kind of distinction to what are simply pamphlets or text-books that have been preserved by accident from the ephemeralness which was the common lot of hundreds of their fellows. One comes to regard as literature things that had no kind of literary value for their first audiences; to apply the same seriousness of judgment and the same tests to the pamphlets of Nash and Dekker as to the prose of Sidney and Bacon. One loses, in fact, that power to distinguish the important from the trivial which is one of the functions of a sound literary taste. Now, a study of the minor writing of the past is, of course, well worth a reader's pains. Pamphlets, chronicle histories, text-books and the like have an historical importance; they give us glimpses of the manners and habits and modes of thought of the day. They tell us more about the outward show of life than do the greater books. If you are interested in social history, they are the very thing. But the student of literature ought to beware of them, nor ought he to touch them till he is familiar with the big and lasting things. A man does not possess English literature if he knows what Dekker tells of *The Seven Deadly Sins of London* and does not know *The Faerie Queen*. Though the wide and curious interest of the Romantic critics of the nineteenth

century found and illumined the byways of Elizabethan writing, the safest method of approach is the method of their predecessors—to keep hold on common sense, to look at literature, not historically as through the wrong end of a telescope, but closely and without a sense of intervening time, to know the best—the "classic"—and study it before the minor things.

In Elizabeth's reign, prose became for the first time, with cheapened printing, the common vehicle of amusement and information, and the books that remain to us cover many departments of writing. There are the pamphleteers, of whom Nash is the ablest, the most productive and the most brilliant. There are the historians who set down for us for the first time what they knew of the earlier history of England, Holinshed, Hall and the rest. There are the writers, like Harrison and Stubbs, who described the England of their own day. There are the novelists who translated stories mainly from Italian sources, like Painter and Fenton and Lodge. Finally, there are the narratives of those voyages which gave the age its essential romantic background and the air from which infuses its whole literature, set forth by the voyagers themselves. The two great collections of these, Hakluyt's and Purchas's, were among the most popular books of the time. To them indeed we must look for the first beginnings of our modern English prose and some of its finest passages. The writers, as often

as not, were otherwise utterly unknown: ships' pursers, supercargoes, and the like; men without any special literary craft or training, whose style is great largely because of the greatness of their subject and because they had no rhetorical artifices to stand between them and the plain and direct telling of a stirring tale. The influence of their writing not only helped English prose towards the gravity and simplicity which it attained in the seventeenth century; it gave a basis for a large part of the philosophical literature which is so characteristic a product of Jacobean England. On the reports brought home by these voyagers and printed in their narratives were founded in part those conceptions of the conditions of the "natural man" which took such a prominent place in the work of Hobbes and Locke. Hobbes' description of the life of nature as "nasty, solitary, brutish and short," and Locke's theories of civil government, and abroad, the work of Montesquieu and Rousseau, all took as the basis of their theories the observations of the men of travel. Locke himself is the best example of the closeness of this alliance. He was a diligent student of the text of the voyagers, and himself edited out of Purchas the best collection of them current in his day.

All these people wrote without knowing that they wrote well. Of authors as conscious of a literary intention as the poets were, there are only two, Sidney and Lyly; and of authors who, though

their first aim was hardly an artistic one, achieved an artistic result, only Bacon, Hooker, and the translators of the Bible. The Authorized Version of the Bible, and most of the work of Bacon, belong strictly not to the reign of Elizabeth but to that of James, and we shall have to look at it when we come to discuss the seventeenth century. Hooker, in his book on Ecclesiastical Polity (an endeavour to set forth the grounds of orthodox Anglicanism), employed a fine moderation which has permanently influenced the study of the subject, and a generous, flowing, melodious style which has attracted many writers since and is familiar to us to-day in the effect of it on Ruskin in his earlier works. Lyly and Sidney are worth looking at more closely.

The age was intoxicated with language. It went mad of a mere delight in words. Its writers were using a new tongue, for English was enriched beyond all recognition with borrowings from the ancient authors; and like all artists who become possessed of a new medium, they used it to excess. Rhetoric was the main subject of instruction in the schools. It was the habit of the rhetoricians to choose some subject for declamation and to encourage their pupils to set round it embellishments and decorations, which cared rather less for enforcing an argument than for the mere delight of language for language' sake. The early Elizabethans' use of the new prose was very like the use that educated Indians make of English to-day. It is not that

these write it incorrectly, but only that they write too richly. And just as fuller use and knowledge teaches them spareness and economy and gives their writing simplicity and vigour, so seventeenth-century practice taught Englishmen to write a more direct and undecorated style and gave us the smooth, simple, and vigorous writing of Dryden—the first really modern English prose. But the Elizabethans loved gaudier methods; they liked highly decorative modes of expression, in prose no less than in verse. The first author to give them these things was John Lyly, whose book *Euphues* (1579–80) was for the ten or so years following its publication a fashionable craze that infected all society and gave its name to a peculiar and highly artificial style of writing that coloured the work of hosts of obscure and forgotten followers. Lyly wrote other things; his comedies may have taught Shakespeare the trick of *Love's Labour's Lost*; he attempted a sequel of his most famous work with better success than commonly attends sequels; but for us and for his own generation he is the author of one book. Everybody read it, everybody copied it. The maxims and sentences of advice for gentlemen which it contained were quoted and admired in the Court, where the author, though he never attained the lucrative position he hoped for, did what flattery could do to make a name for himself. The name "Euphuism" became a current description of an artificial way of using words that

overflowed out of writing into speech and was in the mouths, while the vogue lasted, of everybody who was anybody in the circle that fluttered round the Queen.

The style of *Euphues* was parodied by Shakespeare, and many attempts have been made to imitate it since. Most of them are inaccurate—Sir Walter Scott's wild attempt the most inaccurate of all. They fail because their authors have imagined that "Euphuism" is simply a highly artificial and "flowery" way of talking. As a matter of fact it is directly based on the precepts of the handbooks on rhetoric current in the schools; Lyly only elaborated and made more precise tricks of phrase and writing which had been the exercises of his youth. Its fantastic delight in exuberance of figure and sound owes its inspiration in its form ultimately to Cicero, and in the decorations with which it is embellished to the elder Pliny and later writers of his kind. As is proper in what sprang from an educational exercise, it is made up of a very exact and definite series of parts. The writing is done on a plan which has three main characteristics, as follows. First, the structure of the sentence is based on antithesis and alliteration; that is to say, it falls into equal parts similar in sound but with a different sense; for example, Euphues is described as a young gallant "of more wit than wealth, yet of more wealth than wisdom." All the characters in the book, which is roughly in the form of a

novel, speak in this way, sometimes in sentences long drawn out which are oppressively monotonous and tedious, and sometimes shortly with a certain approach to epigram. The second characteristic of the style is the reference of every stated fact to some classical authority; that is to say, the author cannot mention friendship without quoting David and Jonathan, nor can lovers in his book accuse each other of faithlessness without quoting the instance of Cressida or Æneas. This appeal to classical authority and wealth of classical allusion is used to decorate pages which deal with matters of everyday experience. Seneca, for instance, is quoted as reporting "that too much bending breaketh the bow," a fact which might reasonably have been supposed to be known to the author himself. This particular form of writing perhaps influenced those who copied Lyly more than anything else in his book. It is a fashion of the more artificial kind of Elizabethan writing in all schools to employ a wealth of classical allusion. Even the simple narratives in *Hakluyt's Voyages* are not free from it, and one may hardly hope to read an account of a voyage to the Indies without stumbling on a preliminary reference to the opinions of Aristotle and Plato. Lastly, *Euphues* is characterized by an extraordinary wealth of allusion to natural history, mostly of a fabulous kind. "I have read that the bull being tied to the fig tree loseth his tail; that the whole

herd of deer stand at gaze if they smell a sweet apple; that the dolphin after the sound of music is brought to the shore," and so on. His book is full of these things, and the style weakens and loses its force because of them.

Of course there is much more in his book than this outward decoration. He wrote with the avowed purpose of instructing courtiers and gentlemen how to live. *Euphues* is full of grave reflections and weighty morals, and is indeed a collection of essays on education, on friendship, on religion and philosophy, and on the favourite occupation and curriculum of Elizabethan youth — foreign travel. The fashions and customs of his countrymen which he condemns in the course of his teaching are the same as those inveighed against by Stubbs and other contemporaries. He disliked manners and fashions copied from Italy; particularly he disliked the extravagant fashions of women. One woman only escapes his censure, and she, of course, is the Queen, whom Euphues and his companion in the book come to England to see. In the main, the teaching of Euphues inculcates a humane and liberal, if not very profound creed, and the book shares with *The Faerie Queen* the honour of the earlier Puritanism—the Puritanism that besides the New Testament had the *Republic*.

But Euphues, though he was in his time the popular idol, was not long in finding a successful rival. Seven years before his death Sir Philip

Sidney, in a period of retirement from the Court, wrote *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*; it was published ten years after it had been composed, and when it came it ousted its rival at a blow. Euphuism was killed; it was the common praise of Sidney that he had assisted at its death, and Drayton compliments him as the author who

> "Did first reduce
> Our tongue from Lyly's writing, then in use;
> Talking of stones, stars, plants, of fishes, flies,
> Playing with words and idle similies,
> As the English apes and very zanies be
> Of everything that they do hear and see."

The *Arcadia* is the first English example of the prose pastoral romance, as the *Shepherd's Calendar* is of our pastoral verse. Imitative essays in its style kept appearing for two hundred years after it, till Wordsworth and other poets who knew the country drove its unrealities out of literature. The aim of it and of the school to which it belonged abroad was to find a setting for a story which should leave the author perfectly free to plant in it any improbability he liked, and to do what he liked with the relations of his characters. In the shade of beech trees, the coils of elaborated and intricate love-making wind and unravel themselves through an endless afternoon. In that art nothing is too far-fetched, nothing too sentimental, no sorrow too unreal. The pastoral romance was used, too, to cover other things besides a sentimental and decorative treatment of love. Authors wrapped

up as shepherds their political friends and enemies, and the pastoral eclogues in verse which Spenser and others composed are full of personal and political allusion. Sidney's story carries no politics, and he depends for its interest solely on the wealth of differing episodes and the stories and arguments of love which it contains. The story would furnish plot enough for twenty ordinary novels, but probably those who read it when it was published were attracted by other things than the march of its incidents. Certainly no one could read it for the plot now. Its attraction is mainly one of style. It goes, you feel, one degree beyond *Euphues* in the direction of freedom and poetry. And just because of this greater freedom, its characteristics are much less easy to fix than those of *Euphues*. Perhaps its chief quality is best described as that of exhaustiveness. Sidney will take a word and toss it to and fro in a page till its meaning is sucked dry and more than sucked dry. On page after page the same trick is employed, often in some new and charming way, but with the inevitable effect of wearying the reader, who tries to do the unwisest of all things with a book of this kind—to read on. This trick of bandying words is, of course, common in Shakespeare. Other marks of Sidney's style belong similarly to poetry rather than to prose. Chief of them is what Ruskin christened the "pathetic fallacy"—the assumption (not common in his day) which connects the appearance of nature

with the moods of the artist who looks at it, or demands such a connection. In its day, as we have seen, the *Arcadia* was hailed as a reformation by men nauseated by the rhythmical pattens of Lyly. A modern reader finds himself confronting it in something of the spirit that he would confront the prose romances, say, of William Morris, finding it charming as a poet's essay in prose, but no more: not to be ranked with the highest.

Yet Sidney when he liked could write clear and nervous prose, direct and definite as a soldier's despatches. His *Apology for Poetry* is full of noble things; he never, he said, "heard the old song of Percy and Douglas but he found his heart stirred as with the sound of a trumpet." He is the author of those splendid concentrations of moral wisdom—"then will be the time to die nobly when you cannot live nobly," and "there is nothing more terrible to a guilty heart than the eye of a respected friend." Finally, read his letter to his father's secretary, one of the most forthright documents in English prose:—

"Mr Molyneux. Few words are best. My letters to my father have come to the eyes of some. Neither can I condemn any but you for it. If it be so, you have played the very knave with me; and so I will make you know if I have good proof of it. But that for so much as is past. For that is to come, I assure you before God, that if ever I know you do so much as read any letter I write to my father without his commandment, or my consent, I will thrust my dagger into you. And trust to it, for I speak it in earnest. In the meantime, farewell."

CHAPTER III

THE DRAMA

(1)

Men of science say that the family of mixed ancestry—the product of more than one nationality —is more fertile than one descended from a single ancestral stock; perhaps the analogy is not too fanciful as the starting-point of a study of Elizabethan drama, which owed its strength and vitality, more than to anything else, to the variety of the discordant and contradictory elements of which it was made up. The drama was the form into which were moulded the thoughts and desires of the best spirits of the time. It was the flower of the age. To appreciate its many-sided significances and achievements it is necessary carefully to disentangle its roots, in religion, in the revival of the classics, in popular entertainments, in imports from abroad, in the air of enterprise and adventure which belonged to the time.

As in Greece, drama in England was in its beginning a religious thing. Its oldest continuous tradition was from the mediæval Church. Early in the Middle Ages the clergy and their parishioners began the habit, at Christmas, Easter, and other

holy days, of playing some part of the story of Christ's life suitable to the festival of the day. These plays were liturgical, and originally, no doubt, overshadowed by a choral element. But gradually the inherent human capacity for mimicry and drama took the upper hand; from ceremonies they developed into performances; they passed from the stage in the church porch to the stage in the street. A waggon, the natural human platform for mimicry or oratory, became in England, as it was in Greece, the cradle of the drama. This momentous change in the history of the miracle play, which made it in all but its occasion and its subject a secular thing, took place about the end of the twelfth century. The rise of the town guilds gave the plays a new character; the friendly rivalry of leagued craftsmen elaborated their production; and at length elaborate cycles were founded which were performed at Whitsuntide, beginning at sunrise and lasting all through the day right on to dusk. Each town had its own cycle, and of these the cycles of York, Wakefield, Chester, and Coventry still remain. So, too, does an eye-witness's account of a Chester performance, where the plays took place yearly on three days, beginning with Whit Monday. "The manner of these plays were, every company had his pageant or part, a high scaffold with two rooms, a higher and a lower, upon four wheels. In the lower they apparelled themselves and in the higher room they

played, being all open on the top that all beholders might hear and see them. They began first at the abbey gates, and when the first pageant was played, it was wheeled to the high cross before the mayor and so to every street. So every street had a pageant playing upon it at one time, till all the pageants for the day appointed were played." The "companies" were the town guilds, and the several "pageants" different scenes in Old or New Testament story. As far as was possible, each company took for its pageant some Bible story fitting to its trade; in York the goldsmiths played the three Kings of the East bringing precious gifts, the fishmongers the flood, and the shipwrights the building of Noah's ark. The tone of these plays was not reverent; reverence after all may imply near at hand its opposite in unbelief. But they were realistic and they contained within them the seeds of later drama in the aptitude with which they grafted into the sacred story pastoral and city manners taken straight from life. The shepherds who watched by night at Bethlehem were real English shepherds furnished with boisterous and realistic comic relief. Noah was a real shipwright.

"It shall be clinched each ilk and deal.
With nails that are both noble and new
Thus shall I fix it to the keel,
Take here a rivet and there a screw,
With there bow there now, work I well,
This work, I warrant, both good and true."

Cain and Abel were English farmers just as

truly as Bottom and his fellows were English craftsmen. But then Julius Cæsar has a doublet, and in Dutch pictures the apostles wear broad-brimmed hats. Squeamishness about historical accuracy is of a later date, and when it came we gained in correctness less than we lost in art.

The miracle plays, then, are the oldest antecedent of Elizabethan drama, but it must not be supposed they were over and done with before the great age began. The description of the Chester performances, part of which has been quoted, was written in 1594. Shakespeare must, one would think, have seen the Coventry cycle; at any rate he was familiar, as everyone of the time must have been, with the performances; "Out-heroding Herod" bears witness to that. One must conceive the development of the Elizabethan age as something so rapid in its accessibility to new impressions and new manners and learning and modes of thought, that for years the old and new subsisted side by side. Think of modern Japan, a welter of old faiths and crafts and ideals and inrushing Western civilization all mixed up and side by side in the strangest contrasts, and you will understand what it was. The miracle plays stayed on beside Marlowe and Shakespeare till Puritanism frowned upon them. But when the end came it came quickly. The last recorded performance took place in London when King James entertained Gondomar, the Spanish ambassador. And perhaps

we should regard that as a "command" performance, reviving, as command performances commonly do, something dead for a generation—in this case, perhaps out of compliment to the faith and inclination of a distinguished guest.

Next in order of development after the miracle or mystery plays, though contemporary in their popularity, came what were called "moralities" or "moral interludes"—pieces designed to enforce a religious or ethical lesson and perhaps to get back into drama something of the edification which realism had ousted from the miracles. They dealt in allegorical and figurative personages, expounded wise saws and moral lessons, and squared rather with the careful self-concern of the newly established Protestantism than with the frank and joyous zest in life which was more characteristic of the time. *Everyman*, the oftenest revived and best known of them, if not the best, is very typical of the class. They had their influences, less profound than that of the miracles, on the real drama. It is said the "Vice"—unregeneracy commonly degenerated into comic relief—is the ancestor of the fool in Shakespeare, but more likely both are successive creations of a dynasty of actors who practised the unchanging and immemorial art of the clown. The general structure of *Everyman* and some of its fellows, heightened and made more dramatic, gave us Marlowe's *Faustus*. There perhaps the influence ends.

The rise of a professional class of actors brought one step nearer the full growth of drama. Companies of strolling players formed themselves and passed from town to town, seeking, like the industrious amateurs of the guilds, civic patronage, and performing in town-halls, market-place booths, or inn-yards, whichever served them best. The structure of the Elizabethan inn-yard (you may see some survivals still) was very favourable for their purpose. The galleries round it made seats like our boxes and circle for the more privileged spectators; in the centre on the floor of the yard stood the crowd, or sat, if they had stools with them. The stage was a platform set on this floor space with its back against one side of the yard, where perhaps one of the inn-rooms served as a dressing-room. So suitable was this "fit-up," as actors call it, that when theatres came to be built in London they were built on the inn-yard pattern. All the playhouses of the Bankside, from the "Curtain" to the "Globe," were square or circular places with galleries rising above one another three parts round, a floor space of beaten earth open to the sky in the middle, and jutting out on to it a platform stage with a tiring room capped by a gallery behind it.

The entertainment given by these companies of players (who usually got the patronage and took the title of some lord) was various. They played moralities and interludes, they played formless

chronicle history plays like the *Troublesome Reign of King John*, on which Shakespeare worked for his *King John*; but above and before all they were each a company of specialists, every one of whom had his own talent and performance for which he was admired. The Elizabethan stage was the ancestor of our music-hall, and to the modern music-hall rather than to the theatre it bears its affinity. If you wish to realize the aspect of the Globe or the Blackfriars, it is to a lower class music-hall you must go. The quality of the audience is a point of agreement. The Globe was frequented by young "bloods" and by the more disreputable portions of the community, racing men (or their equivalents of that day), "coney catchers" and the like; commonly the only women present were women of the town. The similarity extends from the auditorium to the stage. The Elizabethan playgoer delighted in virtuosity; in exhibitions of strength or skill from his actors; the broadsword combat in *Macbeth*, and the wrestling in *As You Like It*, were real trials of skill. The bear in the *Winter's Tale* was no doubt a real bear got from a bear-pit, near by in the Bankside. The comic actors especially were the very grandfathers of our music-hall stars; Tarleton and Kemp and Cowley, the chief of them, were as much popular favourites and esteemed as separate from the plays they played in as any of the artists who play in music-hall or pantomime in our own day. Their

songs and tunes were printed and sold in hundreds as broadsheets, just as pirated music-hall songs are sold to-day. This is to be noted, because it explains a great deal in the subsequent evolution of the drama. It explains the delight of having everything represented actually on the stage, all murders, battles, duels. It explains the magnificent largesse given by Shakespeare to the professional fool. Work had to be found for him, and Shakespeare, whose difficulties were stepping-stones to his triumphs, gave him Touchstone and Feste, the Porter in *Macbeth* and the Fool in *Lear*. Others put lines and songs in for him without caring whether they were incongruous with the action. A play like John Heywood's *Rape of Lucrece*, in which low comedy dialogue and catches are intermingled with the tragic action, and further songs too completely at variance with it printed by the author, when he published his play, in an appendix, is astonishing to the modern reader who takes his notion of Elizabethan Roman tragedy from *Julius Cæsar* or *Sejanus*. Others met the problem in an attitude of frank despair. Not all great tragic writers can easily or gracefully wield the pen of comedy, and Marlowe in *Dr Faustus* took the course of leaving the low comedy which the audience loved and a high-salaried actor demanded, to an inferior collaborator.

Alongside this drama of street platforms and inn-yards and public theatres, there grew another

which, blending with it, produced the Elizabethan drama which we know. The public theatres were not the only places at which plays were produced. At the University, at the Inns of Court (which then more than now were besides centres of study rather exclusive and expensive clubs), and at the Court they were an important part of almost every festival. At these places were produced academic compositions, either allegorical like the masques, copies of which we find in Shakespeare and by Ben Jonson, or comedies modelled on Plautus or Terence, or tragedies modelled on Seneca. The last were incomparably the most important. The Elizabethan age, which always thought of literature as a guide or handmaid to life, was naturally attracted to a poet who dealt in maxims and "sentences"; his rhetoric appealed to men for whom words and great passages of verse were an intoxication that only a few to-day can understand or sympathize with; his bloodthirstiness and gloom to an age so full-blooded as not to shrink from horrors. Tragedies early began to be written on the strictly Senecan model, and generally, like Seneca's, with some ulterior intention. Sackville's *Gorboduc*, the first tragedy in English, produced at a great festival at the Inner Temple, aimed at inducing Elizabeth to marry and save the miseries of a disputed succession. To be put to such a use argues the importance and dignity of this classical tragedy of the learned societies and the Court.

None of the pieces composed in this style were written for the popular theatre, and indeed they could not have been a success on it. The Elizabethan audience, as we have seen, loved action, and in these Senecan tragedies the action took place "off." But they had a strong and abiding influence on the popular stage; they gave it its ghosts, its supernatural warnings, its conception of nemesis and revenge, they gave it its love of introspection and the long passages in which introspection, description or reflection, either in soliloquy or dialogue, holds up the action; contradictorily enough they gave it something at least of its melodrama. Perhaps they helped to enforce the lesson of the miracle plays that a dramatist's proper business was elaboration rather than invention. None of the Elizabethan dramatists except Ben Jonson habitually constructed their own plots. Their method was to take something ready at their hands and overlay it with realism or poetry or romance. The stories of their plays, like that of Hamlet's Mousetrap, were "extant and writ in choice Italian," and very often their methods of preparation were very like his.

It is time now to turn to the dramatists themselves.

(2)

Of Marlowe, Kyd, Greene, and Peele, the "University Wits" who fused the academic and the popular drama, and, by giving the latter a sense

of literature and learning to mould it to finer issues, gave us Shakespeare, only Marlowe is of considerable literary importance. Greene and Peele, the former by his comedies, the latter by his historical plays, and Kyd by his tragedies, have their places in the text-books, but they belong to a secondary order of dramatic talent. Greene's plays, indeed, of which only five remain to us, are by no means his best work. He is most charming in his novels and in the songs and love lyrics interspersed in them. One of these—*Pandosto, the Triumph of Time*—seems to have given Shakespeare the plot of the *Winter's Tale*. Of his plays all but one are comedies, but they give no hint of the profligacy of life which he has himself so fully unfolded to us in his autobiographical pamphlets, and which made him a byword even in the full-blooded age in which he lived. Their chief merit, perhaps, lies in the beauty of language and imagery which they disclose from time to time in their uneven pages—a beauty drawn directly from a study of the classical poets, chiefly Ovid, whom Greene's university training enabled him, no doubt, to read in the original. Of Peele's six plays, the two chronicle histories were the most popular, and they had the deepest influence on the drama of the succeeding generation. As was natural in a writer working for the new popular theatre and depending on popular success, hatred of Spain and "no Popery" are the mainsprings of their plots. Elinor, the

wife of Edward I., is a Spanish princess and a monster of lust and pride, and Stukely, the hero of the *Battle of Alcazar*, is a renegade Englishman commissioned by the Pope to raise a rebellion in Ireland. With Kyd we come to more serious matter. We have seen how the drama modelled on Seneca had attained in the Inns of Court and at the Universities an academic and literary eminence; in the popular theatres, on the other hand, though there was, by the time of Greene and Peele, a vigorous comic tradition, there was as yet no tragic school. By transferring the Senecan drama to the London stage, by seizing hold of its essential faculty which was the gift of arousing and sustaining horror and excitement, and by altering its method so that the action, instead of being reported by spectators and messengers, was directly represented, and the plot, instead of being concerned with classic myth or tradition, took love or political intrigue for its theme, Kyd gave English tragedy the impulse which has given us not only *Titus Andronicus*, but *Hamlet*, the *Duchess of Malfi*, *The Cenci*, and for the matter of that every popular melodrama since. The *Spanish Tragedy*, which was the play by which these things were accomplished, has little character-interest; individuality does not assert itself; it is, as it were, *Hamlet* without the Prince of Denmark. But if it has none of the psychological study which makes Shakespeare's tragedies supreme, and in a less complete and subtle way gives interest to

those of Middleton and Webster, it has the merit of continuous sensational interest—the interest of incident and action—which is the mark of melodrama as a form of stage-craft. It has, too, a narrower technical interest. It established for the first time the device of the subordinate plot which Shakespeare worked with such effect in *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, and it is the origin of some of the most permanent pieces of stage "business" of Elizabethan tragedy—the use of dumb show (as in the fourth act of *Macbeth* at his last encounter with the witches), the device of a play within a play (as in *Hamlet*), the employment of madness and feigning madness, as in *Hamlet* and *King Lear* and many others. It is no wonder that the play passed into the minds not only of Kyd's fellow-authors, but of his audiences, and that a quotation from it or a line in parody was the surest and most successful appeal that the stage could make for years afterwards to the stalls.

But Kyd, though his historical position makes him important, must take, on the general ground of literary merit, an inferior place. Marlowe ranks amongst the greatest. It is not merely that historically he is the head and fount of the whole movement, that he changed blank verse, which had been a lumbering instrument before him, into something rich and ringing and rapid and made it the vehicle for the greatest English poetry after him. Historical relations apart, he is great in himself.

More than any other English writer of any age, except Byron, he symbolizes the youth of his time: its hot-bloodedness, its lust after knowledge and power and life, inspire all his pages. The teaching of Machiavelli, misunderstood for their own purposes by would-be imitators, furnished the reign of Elizabeth with the only political ideals it possessed. The simple brutalism of the creed, with means justified by ends and the unbridled self-regarding pursuit of power, attracted men for whom the Spanish monarchy and the struggle to overthrow it were the main factors in politics. Marlowe took it and turned it to his own uses. There is in his writings a lust of power, "a hunger and thirst after unrighteousness," a glow of the imagination unhallowed by anything but its own energy, which is in the spirit of the time. In *Tamburlaine* it is the power of conquest, stirred by and reflecting the great deeds of his day. In *Dr Faustus* it is the pride of will and eagerness of curiosity. Both have their basis in the voyagers. "Without the voyagers," says Professor Walter Raleigh, "Marlowe is inconceivable." His imagination in every one of his plays is preoccupied with the lust of adventure and the wealth and power adventure brings. Tamburlaine, Eastern conqueror though he is, is at heart an Englishman of the school of Hawkins and Drake. Indeed, the comparison must have occurred to his own age, for an historian of the day, the antiquary Stow, declares Drake to have been "as

famous in Europe and America as Tamburlaine was in Asia and Africa." The high-sounding names and quests which seem to us to give the play an air of unreality and romance were to the Elizabethans real and actual; things as strange and foreign were to be heard any day amongst the motley crowd in the Bankside outside the theatre door. Tamburlaine's last speech when he calls for a map and points the way to unrealized conquests is the very epitome of the age of discovery.

> "Lo here, my sons, are all the golden mines,
> Inestimable wares and precious stones,
> More worth than Asia and all the world beside;
> And from the Antarctic Pole eastward behold
> As much more land, which never was descried,
> Wherein are rocks of pearl that shine as bright
> As all the lamps that beautify the sky."

It is the same in his other plays. Dr Faustus assigns to his serviceable spirits tasks that might have been studied from the books of Hakluyt.

> "I'll have them fly to India for gold,
> Ransack the ocean for orient pearl,
> And search all corners of the new round world
> For pleasant fruits and princely delicates."

Faustus is devoured by a tormenting desire to enlarge his knowledge to the utmost bounds of nature and art and to extend his power with his knowledge. His is the spirit of Renaissance scholarship heightened to a passionate excess. The play gleams with the pride of learning and a knowledge which learning brings, and with the

nemesis that comes after it. "Oh! gentlemen! hear me with patience and tremble not at my speeches. Though my heart pant and quiver to remember that I have been a student here these thirty years; oh! I would I had never seen Wittemberg, never read book!" And after the agonizing struggle in which Faustus's soul is torn from him to hell, learning comes in at the quiet close.

> "Yet, for he was a scholar once admired,
> For wondrous knowledge in our German Schools,
> We'll give his mangled limbs due burial;
> And all the students, clothed in mourning black
> Shall wait upon his heavy funeral."

Some one character is a centre of overmastering pride and ambition in every play. In the *Jew of Malta* it is the hero Barabbas. In *Edward II.* it is Piers Gaveston. In *Edward II.*, indeed, two elements are mixed—the element of Machiavelli and Tamburlaine in Gaveston, and the purely tragic element, which evolves from within itself the style in which it shall be treated, in the King. "The reluctant pangs of abdicating Royalty," wrote Charles Lamb in a famous passage, "furnished hints which Shakespeare scarcely improved in his *Richard II.*; and the death-scene of Marlowe's King moves pity and terror beyond any scene, ancient or modern, with which I am acquainted." Perhaps the play gives the hint of what Marlowe might have become had not the dagger of a groom in a tavern cut short at thirty his burning career.

Even in that time of romance and daring speculation he went further than his fellows. He was said to have been tainted with atheism, to have denied God and the Trinity; had he lived he might have had trouble with the Star Chamber. The free-voyaging intellect of the age found this one way of outlet; but if literary evidences are to be trusted, sixteenth and seventeenth century atheism was a very crude business. The *Atheist's Tragedy* of Tourneur (a dramatist who need not otherwise detain us) gives some measure of its intelligence and depth. Says the villain to the heroine,

> "No? Then invoke
> Your great supposed Protector. I will do't."

to which she:

> "Supposed Protector! Are you an atheist?—then
> I know my fears and prayers are spent in vain."

Marlowe's very faults and extravagances, and they are many, are only the obverse of his greatness. Magnitude and splendour of language, when the thought is too shrunken to fill it out, becomes mere inflation. He was a butt of the parodists of the day. And Shakespeare, though he honoured him "on this side idolatry," did his share of ridicule. Ancient Pistol is fed and stuffed with relics and rags of Marlowesque affectation.

> "Holla! ye pampered jades of Asia,
> Can ye not draw but twenty miles a day?"

is a quotation taken straight from *Tamburlaine.*

(3)

Shakespeare refuses to be crushed within the limits of a general essay, and a detailed study of him cannot be attempted here.

He was two months younger than Marlowe, and he survived him by more than twenty years. In the course of his life he raised the drama to a point of perfection unimagined by those who had gone before him, and made himself, not only the greatest poet and dramatist of the age, but the acknowledged master of written literature in any time or tongue. Unlike most of his contemporaries and successors, who were nearly all Londoners, and most of them men of university education, Shakespeare was a countryman born and had no more than a countryman's schooling. It is the fashion of those who would like to prove that his works were written by someone else to assert that we know little of his life, and that the little which we do know makes it incredible that the son of a butcher and wool merchant in Stratford-on-Avon should have written these plays. It is, on the contrary, the fact that we know more about his career than we do about that of any of his contemporary playwrights, that scarcely a year passes but that we add something to our knowledge, and that what from the evidence of contemporary authors and others of the century following, from records and documents, legal and

otherwise, which have been preserved, and from the internal evidence which a laborious detective skill has gathered from the plays themselves, we have now a reasonably certain record of the course of his life, and can place in their proper order the things that he wrote. Of course, many points are still dark to us. We know of his parentage, his marriage, and his education, and the financial troubles of his father, which supply an adequate reason for his going to London to seek his fortune, but we do not know exactly how or when he went, and what he did when he first went there. What is certain is that in 1586 he was already a member of the company of players under the patronage of the Earl of Leicester, and that he continued with it until 1609, when he left for Stratford, by which time it was under the patronage of the king himself. As an actor he does not seem to have been particularly remarkable, and the few parts that tradition or record has assigned to him are none of them leading ones.

It is difficult to fix exactly the time at which his dramatic work began. Probably it was at or about the year 1590. At any rate, for twenty years after that date he produced an average of two plays a year, most of them entirely written by himself, but some of the earlier and later probably collaborations with other men or adaptations from their work. Only sixteen of them were published in his lifetime, and then clearly not at the dates at which

they were written or produced. The others were not put in print until seven years after his death, in the folio which is the main canon of his works, and they are there arranged, not according to chronological order, but according to subject-matter. Laborious research has, however, made the order of them fairly certain, and the criterion by which the order has been decided is mainly that of the quality of the blank verse. We have seen earlier how this metre after its introduction developed in variety and freedom, and grew from a simple and rather monotonous series of uniformly accented lines into the most effective and various medium of poetic expression that our language possesses. Now the blank verse of Shakespeare, when the plays are set in their proper order, is, as it were, an epitome of the development of the metre from Surrey, who used it first, through Marlowe to Milton, who a quarter of a century after Shakespeare's death took it up again for high poetic uses. If we find, then, in the folio edition some plays in which blank verse is used in the way of Surrey and Marlowe, that is to say regularly following formal rules of accent and pause, and clearly marking off one line from another, and if we find in others that a varied pause and stress continually run the sense on from one line to another, and that even extra syllables are added which the strictest rules of prosody would not seem to admit, we are justified in assuming that the more formal and imitative style came

first, and that the poet, when he increased his command over his medium, began to use it in his own way, to find in it the possibility of fresh dramatic expressiveness, and gradually to absolve himself from the formality of rule. Other signs of the same kind enforce the theory of chronology which was originally based on blank verse. Rhyme, which is frequent in the plays which are written with regularly built lines, is absent in the plays where the verse is used more freely, and we are justified in assuming that its disappearance is due to advancing mastery of an art. Finally, when we find some plays that use continually fantastic images or puns and plays upon words, and others which are entirely free from these artifices, we feel justified in assuming that freedom means maturity and that the most fantastic are also the earliest works. All this internal evidence is, of course, eked out by external help—contemporary references to plays, quotations from them, records of performances, and so forth,—and the result is the order of plays, lighter comedies, and chronicle histories first, graver comedies and an ascending scale of tragedies later, and then grave and peaceful romances at the close, which is familiar now to every reader and hardly disputed by any.

Shakespeare, as all this implies, is superior to his contemporaries in his command over the medium of verse; but that alone would not have sufficed to give him the pre-eminence which they and his

successors have united in according him. The drama always comes very near the novel, and the Elizabethan drama is closer than any to the methods which novelists use. It is in fact a narrative art, and it is in this power of telling the story that Shakespeare excels the other playwrights of his time. A study of the plots of either the comedies or the tragedies will convince the reader that the orderly faculty of marshalling events has never been so completely shown in the work of any other writer. Let such a play be taken as *The Merchant of Venice.* It will be noted how easily the action moves from Venice itself to Belmont, from the fortunes of Antonio to those of Bassanio, and from both to those of Portia on the one hand and Shylock on the other. A dramatist of a stricter school could not have got so many figures onto his canvas; no novelist whose works we know could have sketched his plot at once so fully and sparingly, introduced so many figures and kept each one so justly and perfectly in its place. If such a play be compared (and the comparison would be even more striking in the case of the tragedies) with the work of Shakespeare's contemporaries and successors, it will be seen that apart from the superiority of his genius in the two domains of poetry and the delineation of character, he was incomparably the best story-teller of his time.

It is not, however, by his incomparable gift for story-telling that the world has judged him to be

the best dramatist of his own or any age. Shakespeare is pre-eminent not because he was a teller of tales—for indeed most of his stories had been told beforehand, though less well than by him,—but because of the incomparable insight which he possessed into character, into the motives and the springs of men's actions, and into the inevitable processes by which events follow from the strength or the weaknesses of the actors who take part in them. As a successful business playwright, he had to appeal to the audiences on whom his livelihood depended with stories full of incident and cast in a mould of melodrama, but he contrived to satisfy his artistic conscience at the same time as he satisfied the longings of his audience. Not only did he do the melodrama better than Kyd or Marston, but he added to it an interest which was absent in their work and that of other men. *Hamlet* is a melodrama of the same school as the *Spanish Tragedy* and the works of Marston and Webster, but it has added to the interest of incident which it shares with these the rarer and more subtle interest of character. There is a popular saying which compares anything which has been robbed utterly of its significance to the play of *Hamlet* without the Prince of Denmark, and the comparison gives the measure of Shakespeare's peculiar genius. *Hamlet* without the Prince of Denmark would still be the best melodrama of its time, but it would lack everything

that has made it the greatest tragedy since the fall of Greece, the greatest which the modern world will ever know. The supreme and pre-eminent interest in *Hamlet* is not the plot but the character of the hero, the indecision which is born in him as the result of a terrible train of events and a great responsibility, his struggle with it and his final triumph over it, with the tragedy which follows on the immersion of a man too fine and sensitive to bear the rude shock of the world into the midst of events which were too much for him. It is the same in *Othello*, in *King Lear*, and in *Macbeth*, in all of which the story as a story is better told than it has been by anyone else, but in all of which the circumstance by which they are remembered is the interest not of plot but of character.

We must take up the story of the drama with the reign of James and with the contemporaries of Shakespeare's later period, though, of course, a treatment which is conditioned by the order of development is not strictly chronological, and some of the plays we shall have to refer to belong to the close of the sixteenth century. We are apt to forget that alongside Shakespeare and at his heels other dramatists were supplying material for the theatre. The influence of Marlowe, and particularly of Kyd, whose *Spanish Tragedy* with its crude mechanism of ghosts and madness and revenge caught the popular taste, worked itself out in a score of

journeymen dramatists, mere hack writers, who turned their hand to plays as the hacks of to-day turn their hand to novels, and with no more literary merit than that caught as an echo from better men than themselves. One of the worst of these—he is also one of the most typical—was John Marston, a purveyor of tragic gloom and sardonic satire, and an impostor in both, whose tragedy *Antonio and Mellida* was published in the same year as Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Both plays owed their style and plot to the same tradition—the tradition created by Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*—in which ghostly promptings to revenge, terrible crime, and a feigned madman waiting his opportunity are the elements of tragedy. Nothing could be more eloquent as evidence of the relations of Shakespeare to his age than a comparison of the two. The style of *Antonio and Mellida* is the style of *The Murder of Gonzago*. There is no subtlety nor introspection, the pale cast of thought falls with no shadow over its scenes. And it is typical of a score of plays of the kind we have and, beyond doubt, of hundreds that have perished. Shakespeare stands alone.

Beside this journey-work tragedy of revenge and murder which had its root through Kyd and Marlowe in Seneca and in Italian romance, there was a journey-work comedy of low life made up of loosely constructed strings of incidents, buffoonery, and romance, that had its roots in a joyous and

fantastic study of the common people. These plays are happy and high-spirited and, compared with the ordinary run of the tragedies, of better workmanship. They deal in the familiar situations of low comedy—the clown, the thrifty citizen and his frivolous wife, the gallant, the bawd, the good apprentice and the bad, portrayed vigorously and tersely and with a careless kindly gaiety that still charms in the reading. The best writers in this kind were Middleton and Dekker, and the best play to read as a sample of it *Eastward Ho!* in which Marston put off his affectation of sardonical melancholy and joined with Jonson and Dekker and perhaps Chapman to produce what is the masterpiece of the non-Shakespearean comedy of the time.

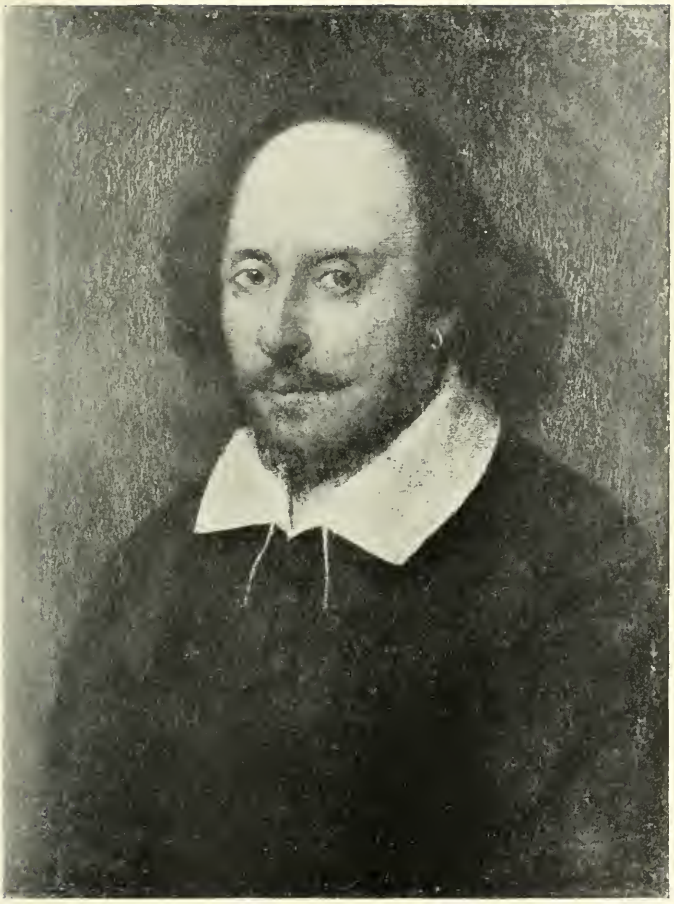
For all our habit of grouping their works together, it is a far cry in spirit and temperament from the dramatists whose heyday was under Elizabeth to those who reached their prime under her successor. Quickly though insensibly the temper of the nation suffered eclipse. The high hopes and the ardency of the reign of Elizabeth saddened into a profound pessimism and gloom in that of James. This apparition of unsought melancholy has been widely noted and generally assumed to be inexplicable. In broad outline its causes are clear enough. "To travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive." The Elizabethans were, if ever any were, hopeful travellers. The winds blew them to the four quarters of the world;

they navigated all seas; they sacked rich cities. They beat off the great Armada, and harried the very coasts of Spain. They pushed discovery to the ends of the world and amassed great wealth. Under James all these things were over. Peace was made with Spain: national pride was wounded by the solicitous anxiety of the King for a Spanish marriage for the heir to the throne. Sir Walter Raleigh, a romantic adventurer lingering beyond his time, was beheaded out of hand by the ungenerous timidity of the monarch to whom had been transferred devotion and loyalty he was unfitted to receive. The Court which had been a centre of flashing and gleaming brilliance degenerated into a knot of sycophants humouring the pragmatic and self-important folly of a king in whom had implanted themselves all the vices of the Scots and none of their virtues. Nothing seemed left remarkable beneath the visiting moon. The bright day was done and they were for the dark. The uprising of Puritanism and the shadow of impending religious strife darkened the temper of the time.

The change affected all literature, and particularly the drama, which, because it appeals to what all men have in common, commonly reflects soonest a change in the outlook or spirits of a people. The onslaughts of the dramatists on the Puritans, always implacable enemies of the theatre, became more virulent and envenomed. What a difference

between the sunny satire of Sir Andrew Aguecheek and the dark animosity of *The Atheists' Tragedy* with its Languebeau Snuffe ready to carry out any villainy proposed to him! "I speak, sir," says a lady in the same play to a courtier who played with her in an attempt to carry on a quick-witted, "conceited" love passage in the vein of *Much Ado*, "I speak, sir, as the fashion now is, in earnest." The quick-witted, light-hearted age was gone. It is natural that tragedy reflected this melancholy in its deepest form. Gloom deepened and had no light to relieve it, men supped full of horrors—there was no slackening of the tension, no concession to overwrought nerves, no resting-place for the overwrought soul. It is in the dramatist John Webster that this new spirit has its most powerful exponent.

The influence of Machiavelli, which had given Marlowe tragic figures that were bright and splendid and burning, smouldered in Webster into a duskier and intenser heat. His fame rests on two tragedies, *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*. Both are stories of lust and crime, full of hate and hideous vengeances, and through each runs a vein of bitter and ironical comment on men and women. In them chance plays the part of fate. "Blind accident and blundering mishap—'such a mistake,' says one of the criminals, 'as I have often seen in a play'—are the steersmen of their fortunes and the doomsmen of their deeds."



WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Chandos portrait from the National Portrait Gallery

His characters are gloomy; meditative and philosophic murderers, cynical informers, sad and loving women, and they are all themselves in every phrase that they utter. But they are studied in earnestness and sincerity. Unquestionably he is the greatest of Shakespeare's successors in the romantic drama, perhaps his only direct imitator. He has single lines worthy to set beside those in *Othello* or *King Lear*. His dirge in the *Duchess of Malfi* Charles Lamb thought worthy to be set beside the ditty in *The Tempest* which reminds Ferdinand of his drowned father. "As that is of the water, watery, so this is of the earth, earthy." He has earned his place among the greatest of our dramatists by his two plays, the theme of which matched his sombre genius and the sombreness of the season in which it flowered.

But the drama could not survive long the altered times, and the voluminous plays of Beaumont and Fletcher mark the beginning of the end. They are the decadence of Elizabethan drama. Decadence is a term often used loosely and therefore hard to define, but we may say broadly that an art is decadent when any particular one of the elements which go to its making occurs in excess and disturbs the balance of forces which keeps the work a coherent and intact whole. Poetry is decadent when the sound is allowed to outrun the sense, or when the suggestions, say, of colour which it contains are allowed to crowd out its deeper

implications. Thus we can call such a poem as this one, well known, of O'Shaughnessy's,

> "We are the music-makers,
> We are the dreamers of dreams,"

decadent because it conveys nothing but the mere delight in an obvious rhythm of words, or such a poem as Morris's "Two red roses across the moon," because a meaningless refrain, merely pleasing in its word texture, breaks in at intervals on the reader. The drama of Beaumont and Fletcher is decadent in two ways. In the first place, those variations and licences with which Shakespeare in his later plays diversified the blank verse handed on to him by Marlowe, they use without any restraint or measure. "Weak" endings and "double" endings—*i.e.* lines which end either on a conjunction or preposition or some other unstressed word, or lines in which there is a syllable too many —abound in their plays. They destroyed blank verse as a musical and resonant poetic instrument by letting this element of variety outrun the sparing and skilful use which alone could justify it. But they were decadent in other and deeper ways than that. Sentiment in their plays usurps the place of character. Eloquent and moving speeches and fine figures are no longer subservient to the presentation of character in action, but are set down for their own sake. "What strange self-trumpeters and tongue-bullies all the brave soldiers of Beaumont and Fletcher are!" said Coleridge.

When they die they die to the music of their own virtue. When dreadful deeds are done they are described not with that authentic and lurid vividness which throws light on the working of the human heart in Shakespeare or Webster, but in tedious rhetoric. Resignation, not fortitude, is the authors' forte, and they play upon it amazingly. The sterner tones of their predecessors melt into the long-drawn, broken accents of pathos and woe. This delight not in action or in emotion arising from action, but in passivity of suffering, is only one aspect of a certain mental flaccidity in grain. Shakespeare may be free and even coarse. Beaumont and Fletcher cultivate indecency. They made their subject not their master but their plaything, or an occasion for the convenient exercise of their own powers of figure and rhetoric.

Of their followers, Massinger, Ford, and Shirley, no more need be said than they carried one step further the faults of their masters. Emotion and tragic passion give way to wiredrawn sentiment. Tragedy takes on the air of a masquerade. With them romantic drama died a natural death, and the Puritans' closing of the theatre only gave it a *coup de grâce.* In England it has had no second birth.

(4)

Outside the direct romantic succession there worked another author whose lack of sympathy with it, as well as his close connection with the age

which followed, justifies his separate treatment. Ben Jonson shows a marked contrast to Shakespeare in his character, his accomplishments, and his attitude to letters, while his career was more varied than Shakespeare's own. The first "classic" in English writing, he was a "romantic" in action. In his adventurous youth he was by turns scholar, soldier, bricklayer, actor. He trailed a pike with Leicester in the Low Countries; on his return to England fought a duel and killed his man, only escaping hanging by benefit of clergy; at the end of his life he was poet laureate. Such a career is sufficiently diversified, and it forms a striking contrast to the plainness and severity of his work. But it must not lead us to forget or underestimate his learning and knowledge. Not Gray nor Tennyson nor Swinburne—perhaps not even Milton—was a better scholar. He is one of the earliest of English writers to hold and express different theories about literature. He consciously appointed himself a teacher; was a missionary of literature with a definite creed.

But though in a general way his dramatic principles are opposed to the romantic tendencies of his age, he is by no means blindly classical. He never consented to be bound by the "Unities"—that conception of dramatic construction evolved out of Aristotle and Horace and elaborated in the Renaissance till, in its strictest form, it laid down that the whole scene of a play should be in one

place, its whole action deal with one single series of events, and the time it represented as elapsing be no greater than the time it took in playing. He was always pre-eminently an Englishman of his own day with a scholar's rather than a poet's temper, hating extravagance, hating bombast and cant, and only limited because in ruling out these things he ruled out much else that was essential to the spirit of the time. As a craftsman he was uncompromising; he never bowed to the tastes of the public and never veiled his scorn of those—Shakespeare among them—whom he conceived to do so; but he knew and valued his own work, as his famous last word to an audience who might be unsympathetic stands to witness:

"By God, 'tis good, and if you like it you may."

Compare the temper it reveals with the titles of the two contemporary comedies of his gentler and greater brother, the one *As You Like It*, the other *What You Will*. Of the two attitudes towards the public, and they might stand as typical of two kinds of artists, neither perhaps can claim complete sincerity. A truculent and noisy disclaimer of their favours is not a bad tone to assume towards an audience; in the end, it is apt to succeed as well as the sub-ironical compliance which is its opposite.

Jonson's theory of comedy and the consciousness with which he set it against the practice of his con-

temporaries, and particularly of Shakespeare, receive explicit statement in the prologue to *Every Man Out of His Humour*—one of his earlier plays. "I travail with another objection, Signor, which I fear will be enforced against the author ere I can be delivered of it," says Mitis. "What's that, sir?" replies Cordatus. Mitis: "That the argument of his comedy might have been of some other nature, as of a duke to be in love with a countess, and that countess to be in love with the duke's son, and the son to love the lady's waiting-maid; some such cross-wooing, better than to be thus near and familiarly allied to the times." Cordatus: "You say well, but I would fain hear one of these autumn-judgments define *Quin sit comœdia?* If he cannot, let him concern himself with Cicero's definition, till he have strength to propose to himself a better, who would have a comedy to be *imitatio vitæ, speculum consuetudinis, imago veritatis*; a thing throughout pleasant and ridiculous and accommodated to the correction of manners." That was what he meant his comedy to be, and so he conceived the popular comedy of the day, *Twelfth Night* and *Much Ado.* Shakespeare might play with dukes and countesses, serving-women and pages, clowns and disguises; he would come down more near and ally himself familiarly with the times. So comedy was to be medicinal, to purge contemporary London of its follies and its sins; and it was to be constructed with regularity and elaboration, respectful to the

Unities if not ruled by them, and built up of characters each the embodiment of some "humour" or eccentricity, and each, when his eccentricity is displaying itself at its fullest, outwitted and exposed. This conception of "humours," based on a physiology which was already obsolescent, takes heavily from the realism of Jonson's methods, nor does his use of a careful vocabulary of contemporary colloquialism and slang save him from a certain dryness and tediousness to modern readers. The truth is he was less a satirist of contemporary manners than a satirist in the abstract who followed the models of classical writers in this style, and he found the vices and follies of his own day hardly adequate to the intricacy and elaborateness of the plots which he constructed for their exposure. At the first glance his people are contemporary types, at the second they betray themselves for what they are really—cock-shies set up by the new comedy of Greece that every "classical" satirist in Rome or France or England has had his shot at since. One wonders whether Ben Jonson, for all his satirical intention, had as much observation—as much of an eye for contemporary types—as Shakespeare's rustics and roysterers prove him to have had. It follows that all but one or two of his plays, when they are put on the stage to-day, are apt to come to one with a sense of remoteness and other-worldliness which we hardly feel with Shakespeare or Molière. His muse moves along the highroad of comedy which

is the Roman road, and she carries in her train types that have done service to many since the ancients fashioned them years ago. Jealous husbands, foolish pragmatic fathers, a dissolute son, a boastful soldier, a cunning slave—they all are merely counters by which the game of comedy used to be played. In England, since Shakespeare took his hold on the stage, that road has been stopped for us, that game has ceased to amuse.

Ben Jonson, then, in a certain degree failed in his intention. Had he kept closer to contemporary life, instead of merely grafting on to it types he had learned from books, he might have made himself an English Molière—without Molière's breadth and clarity, but with a corresponding vigour and strength which would have kept his work sweet. And he might have founded a school of comedy that would have got its roots deeper into our national life than the trivial and licentious Restoration comedy ever succeeded in doing. As it is, his importance is mostly historical. One must credit him with being the first of the English "classics"—the forerunner of the age which gave us Dryden and Swift and Pope. Perhaps that is enough in his praise.

CHAPTER IV

THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

(1)

With the seventeenth century the great school of imaginative writers that made glorious the last years of Elizabeth's reign had passed away. Spenser was dead before 1600, Sir Philip Sidney a dozen years earlier; and though Shakespeare and Drayton and many other men whom we class roughly as Elizabethan lived on to work under James, their temper and their ideals belong to the earlier day. The seventeenth century, not in England only but in Europe, brought a new way of thinking with it, and gave a new direction to human interest and to human affairs. It is not perhaps easy to define, nor is it visible in the greater writers of the time. Milton, for instance, and even Sir Thomas Browne are both of them too big, and in their genius too far separated from their fellows, to give us much clue to altered conditions. It is commonly in the work of lesser and forgotten writers that the spirit of an age has it fullest expression. Genius is a law to itself; it moves in another dimension; it is out of time. To define

this seventeenth-century spirit, then, one must look at the literature of the age as a whole. What is there that one finds in it which marks a change in temperament and outlook from the Renaissance, and from the time which immediately followed it?

Putting it very broadly, one may say that literature in the seventeenth century becomes for the first time essentially modern in spirit. We begin calling literature "modern" at the Renaissance because the discovery of the New World, and the widening of human experience and knowledge which that and the revival of classical learning implied, mark a definite break from a way of thought which had been continuous since the break-up of the Roman Empire. The men of the Renaissance felt themselves to be modern. They started afresh, owing nothing to their immediate forebears except Chaucer, and even when they talked of him they did so in very much the same accent as we do to-day. He was mediæval and remote; the interest which he possessed was a purely literary interest; his readers did not meet him easily on the same plane of thought, or forget the lapse of time which separated him from them. And in another way, too, the Renaissance began modern writing. Inflections had been dropped. The revival of the classics had enriched our vocabulary, and the English language, after a gradual impoverishment which followed the obsolescence one after another of the local dialects, attained a fairly fixed form. There is more differ-

ence between the language of the English writings of Sir Thomas More and that of the prose of Chaucer than there is between that of More and of Ruskin. But it is not till the seventeenth century that the modern spirit, in the fullest sense of the word, comes into being. Defined, it means a spirit of observation, of preoccupation with detail, of stress laid on matter of fact, of analysis of feelings and mental processes, of free argument upon institutions and government. In relation to knowledge, it is the spirit of science; and the study of science, which is the essential intellectual fact in modern history, dates from just this time, from Bacon and Newton and Descartes. In relation to literature, it is the spirit of criticism; and criticism in England is the creation of the seventeenth century. The positive temper, the attitude of realism, is everywhere in the ascendant. The sixteenth century made voyages of discovery; the seventeenth sat down to take stock of the riches it had gathered. For the first time in English literature writing becomes a vehicle for storing and conveying facts.

It would be easy to give instances: one is sufficient here. Biography, which is one of the most characteristic kinds of English writing, was unknown to the moderns as late as the sixteenth century. Partly the awakened interest in the careers of the ancient statesmen and soldiers which the study of Plutarch had excited, and partly the general interest in and craving for facts, set men

writing down the lives of their fellows. The earliest English biographies date from this time. In the beginning they were concerned, like the Lives of Plutarch, with men of action; and when Sir Fulke Greville wrote a brief account of his friend Sir Philip Sidney, it was the courtier and the soldier, and not the author, that he designed to celebrate. But soon men of letters came within their scope; and though the interest in the lives of authors came too late to give us the contemporary life of Shakespeare we so much long for, it was early enough to make possible those masterpieces of condensed biography in which Isaak Walton celebrates Herbert and Donne. Fuller and Aubrey, to name only two authors, spent lives of laborious industry in hunting down and chronicling the smallest facts about the worthies of their day and the time immediately before them. Autobiography followed where biography led. Lord Herbert of Cherbury and Margaret Duchess of Newcastle, as well as less reputable persons, followed the new mode. By the time of the Restoration Pepys and Evelyn were keeping their diaries, and Fox his journal—Evelyn perhaps consciously for the sake of posterity, Pepys and Fox for themselves. Just as in poetry the lyric, that is the expression of personal feeling, became more widely practised, more subtle and more sincere, in prose the letter, the journal, and the autobiography formed themselves to meet the new and growing demand for analysis of the

feelings and the intimate thoughts and sensations of real men and women. A minor form of literature which had a brief but popular vogue ministered less directly to the same need. The "Character," a brief descriptive essay on a contemporary type—a tobacco-seller, an old college butler, or the like—was popular because in its own way it matched the newly awakened taste for realism and fact. The drama, which in the hands of Ben Jonson had attacked folly and wickedness proper to no place or time, descended to the drawing-rooms of the day, and Congreve occupied himself with the portrayal of the social frauds and foolishnesses perpetrated by actual living men and women of fashion in contemporary London. Satire ceased to be a mere expression of a vague discontent, and became a weapon against opposing men and policies. Readers of the new generation were nothing if not critical. They were for testing directly institutions, whether they were literary, social, or political. They wanted facts, and they wanted to take a side.

In the distinct and separate realm of poetry a revolution no less remarkable took place. Spenser had been both a poet and a Puritan: he had designed to show by his great poem the training and fashioning of a Puritan English gentleman. But the alliance between poetry and Puritanism which he typified failed to survive his death. The essentially pagan spirit of the Renaissance which caused

him no doubts nor difficulties proved too strong for his readers and his followers, and the emancipated artistic enthusiasm in which it worked alienated from secular poetry men with deep and strong religious convictions. Religion and morality and poetry, which in Sidney and Spenser had gone hand in hand, separated from each other. Poems like *Venus and Adonis* or like Shakespeare's sonnets could hardly be squared with the sterner temper which persecution began to breed. Even within orthodox Anglicanism poetry and religion began to be deemed no fit company for each other. When George Herbert left off courtier and took orders he burnt his earlier love poetry, and only the persuasion of his friends prevented Donne from following the same course. Pure poetry became more and more an exotic. All Milton's belongs to his earlier youth; his middle age was occupied with controversy and propaganda in prose; when he returned to poetry in blindness and old age it was "to justify the ways of God to man"—to use poetry, that is, for a spiritual and moral rather than an artistic end.

Though the age was curious and inquiring, though poetry and prose tended more and more to be enlisted in the service of non-artistic enthusiasms and to be made the vehicle of deeper emotions and interests than perhaps a northern people could ever find in art, pure and simple, it was not, like the time that followed it, a "prosaic"

age. Enthusiasm burned fierce and clear, displaying itself in the passionate polemic of Milton, in the fanaticism of Bunyan and Fox, hardly more than in the gentle, steadfast search for knowledge of Burton and the wide and vigilant curiosity of Bacon. Its eager experimentalism tried the impossible; wrote poems and then gave them a weight of meaning they could not carry, as when Fletcher in *The Purple Island* designed to allegorize all that the physiology of his day knew of the human body, or Donne sought to convey abstruse scientific fact in a lyric. It gave men a passion for pure learning, set Jonson to turn himself from a bricklayer into the best equipped scholar of his day, and Fuller and Camden grubbing among English records and gathering for the first time materials of scientific value for English history. Enthusiasm gave us poetry that was at once full of learning and of imagination, poetry that was harsh and brutal in its roughness and at the same time impassioned. And it set up a school of prose that combined colloquial readiness and fluency, pregnancy and high sentiment with a cumbrous pedantry of learning which was the fruit of its own excess.

The form in which enthusiasm manifested itself most fiercely was, as we have seen, not favourable to literature. Puritanism drove itself like a wedge into the art of the time, broadening as it went. Had there been no more in it than the moral

earnestness and religiousness of Sidney and Spenser, Cavalier would not have differed from Roundhead, and there might have been no civil war; each party was endowed deeply with the religious sense and Charles I. was a sincerely pious man. But while Spenser and Sidney held that although life as a preparation for eternity must be ordered and strenuous and devout, and care for the hereafter was not incompatible with a frank and full enjoyment of life as it is lived, Puritanism as it developed in the middle classes became a sterner and darker creed. The doctrine of original sin, face to face with the fact that art, like other pleasures, was naturally and readily entered into and enjoyed, forced them to the plain conclusion that art was an evil thing. As early as Shakespeare's youth they had been strong enough to keep the theatres outside London walls; at the time of the Civil War they closed them altogether, and the feud which had lasted for over a generation between them and the dramatists ended in the destruction of the literary drama. In the brief years of their ascendancy they produced no literature, for Milton is much too large to be tied down to their negative creed, and, indeed, in many of his qualities, his love of music and his sensuousness in description, for instance, he is antagonistic to the temper of his day. With the Restoration their earnest and strenuous spirit fled to America. It is noteworthy that it had no literary manifestation there till two centuries after

the time of its passage. Hawthorne's novels are the fruit—the one ripe fruit in art—of the Puritan imagination.

(2)

If the reader adopts the seventeenth-century habit himself and takes stock of what the Elizabethans accomplished in poetry, he will recognize speedily that their work reached various stages of completeness. They perfected the poetic drama and its instrument, blank verse; they perfected, though not in the severer Italian form, the sonnet; they wrote with extraordinary delicacy and finish short lyrics in which a simple and freer manner drawn from the classics took the place of the mediæval intricacies of the ballad and the rondeau. And in the forms which they failed to bring to perfection they did beautiful and noble work. The splendour of *The Faerie Queen* is in separate passages; as a whole it is over-tortuous and slow; its affectations, its sensuousness, the mere difficulty of reading it, makes us feel it a collection of great passages, strung it is true on a large conception, rather than a great work. The Elizabethans, that is, had not discovered the secret of the long poem; the abstract idea of the "heroic" epic which was in all their minds had to wait for embodiment till *Paradise Lost*. In a way their treatment of the pastoral or eclogue form was imperfect too. They used it well, but not so well as their models, Vergil

and Theocritus; they had not quite mastered the convention on which it is built.

The seventeenth century, taking stock in some such fashion of its artistic possessions, found some things it were vain to try to do. It could add nothing to the accomplishment of the English sonnet, so it hardly tried: with the exception of a few sonnets in the Italian form of Milton, the century can show us nothing in this mode of verse. The literary drama was brought to perfection in the early years of it by the surviving Elizabethans; later decades could add nothing to it but licence, and as we saw, the licences they added hastened its destruction. But in other forms the poets of the new time experimented eagerly, and in the stress of experiment, poetry which under Elizabeth had been integral and coherent split into different schools. As the period of the Renaissance was also that of the Reformation, it was only natural a determined effort should sooner or later be made to use poetry for religious purposes. The earliest English hymn-writing, our first devotional verse in the vernacular, belongs to this time, and a Catholic and religious school of lyricism grew and flourished beside the pagan neo-classical writers. From the tumult of experiment three schools disengage themselves, the school of Spenser, the school of Jonson, and the school of Donne.

At the outset of the century Spenser's influence

was triumphant and predominant; his was the main stream with which the other poetic influences of the time merely mingled. His popularity is referable to qualities other than those which belonged peculiarly to his talent as a poet. Puritans loved his religious ardour, and in those Puritan households where the stricter conception of the diabolical nature of all poetry had not penetrated, his works were read—standing on a shelf, may be, between the new translation of the Bible and Sylvester's translation of the French poet Du Bartas' work on the creation, which had a large popularity at that time as "family reading." Probably the Puritans were as blind to the sensuousness of Spenser's language and imagery as they were (and are) to the same qualities in the Bible itself. *The Faerie Queen* would easily achieve innocuousness amongst those who can find nothing but an allegory of the Church in the "Song of Songs." His followers made their allegory a great deal plainer than he had done his. In his poem called *The Purple Island*, Phineas Fletcher, a Puritan imitator of Spenser in Cambridge, essayed to set forth the struggle of the soul at grip with evil, a battle in which the body—the "Purple Island"—is the field. To a modern reader it is a desolating and at times a mildly amusing book, in which everything from the liver to the seven deadly sins is personified; in which after four books of allegorized contemporary anatomy and physiology,

the will (Voletta) engages in a struggle with Satan and conquers by the help of Christ and King James! The allegory is clever—too clever—and the author can paint a pleasant picture, but on the whole he was happier in his pastoral work. His brother Giles made a better attempt at the Spenserian manner. His long poem, *Christ's Victory and Death*, shows for all its carefully Protestant tone high qualities of mysticism; across it Spenser and Milton join hands.

It was, however, in pastoral poetry that Spenser's influence found its pleasantest outlet. One might hesitate to advise a reader to embark on either of the Fletchers. There is no reason why any modern should not read and enjoy Browne or Wither, in whose softly flowing verse the sweetness and contentment of the countryside, that "merry England" which was the background of all sectarian and intellectual strife and labour, finds as in a placid stream a calm reflection and picture of itself. The seventeenth century gave birth to many things that only came to maturity in the nineteenth; if you care for that kind of literary study which searches out origins and digs for hints and models of accepted styles, you will find in Browne that which influenced more than any other single thing the early work of Keats. Browne has another claim to immortality; if it be true, as is now thought, that he was the author of the epitaph on the Countess of Pembroke:

"Underneath this sable hearse
Lies the subject of all verse,
Sidney's sister, Pembroke's mother.
Death, ere thou hast slain another
Fair and learned and good as she,
Time shall throw a dart at thee"—

then he achieved the miracle of a quintessential statement of the spirit of the English Renaissance. For the breath of it stirs in these slow quiet moving lines, and its few and simple words implicate the soul of a period.

By the end of the first quarter of the century the influence of Spenser and the school which worked under it had died out. Its place was taken by the twin schools of Jonson and Donne. Jonson's poetic method is something like his dramatic; he formed himself as exactly as possible on classical models. Horace had written satires and elegies, and epistles and complimentary verses, and Jonson quite consciously and deliberately followed where Horace led. He wrote elegies on the great, letters and courtly compliments and love-lyrics to his friends, satires with an air of general censure. But though he was classical, his style was never latinized. In all of them he strove to pour into an ancient form language that was as intense and vigorous and as purely English as the earliest trumpeters of the Renaissance in England could have wished. The result is not entirely successful. He seldom fails to reproduce classic dignity and good sense; on the other hand, he

seldom succeeds in achieving classic grace and ease. Occasionally, as in his best-known lyric "Drink to me only with thine eyes," he is perfect and achieves an air of spontaneity little short of marvellous, when we know that his images and even his words in the song are all plagiarized from other men. His expression is always clear and vigorous and his sense good and noble. The native earnestness and sincerity of the man shines through as it does in his dramas and his prose. In an age of fantastic and meaningless eulogy—eulogy so amazing in its unexpectedness and abstruseness that the wonder is not so much that it should have been written as that it could have been thought of —Jonson maintains his personal dignity and his good sense. You feel his compliments are such as the best should be, not necessarily understood and properly valued by the public, but of a discriminating sort that by their very comprehending sincerity would be most warmly appreciated by the people to whom they were addressed. His verses to Shakespeare, and his prose commentaries on him too, are models of what self-respecting admiration should be, generous in its praise of excellence, candid in its statement of defects. They are the kind of compliments that Shakespeare himself, if he had grace enough, must have loved to receive.

Very different from his direct and dignified manner is the closely packed style of Donne, who,

BENJAMIN JONSON.

From the portrait after G. Honthorst in the National Portrait Gallery.

Milton apart, is the greatest English writer of the century, though his obscurity has kept him out of general reading. No poetry in English, not even Browning's, is more difficult to understand. The obscurity of Donne and Browning proceed from such similar causes that they are worth examining together. In both, as in the obscure passages in Shakespeare's later plays, obscurity arises not because the poet says too little but because he attempts to say too much. He huddles a new thought on the one before it, before the first has had time to express itself; he sees things or analyses emotions so swiftly and subtly himself that he forgets the slower comprehensions of his readers; he is for analysing things far deeper than the ordinary mind commonly can. His wide and curious knowledge finds terms and likenesses to express his meaning unknown to us; he sees things from a dozen points of view at once and tumbles a hint of each separate vision in a heap out on to the page; his restless intellect finds new and subtler shades of emotion and thought invisible to other pairs of eyes, and cannot, because speech is modelled on the average of our intelligences, find words to express them; he is always trembling on the brink of the inarticulate. All this applies to both Donne and Browning, and the comparison could be pushed further still. Both draw the knowledge which is the main cause of their obscurity from the same source, the bypaths of mediævalism. Browning's

Sordello is obscure because he knows too much about mediæval Italian history; Donne's *Anniversary* because he is too deeply read in mediæval scholasticism and speculation. Both make themselves more difficult to the reader who is familiar with the poetry of their contemporaries by the disconcerting freshness of their point of view. Seventeenth-century love poetry was idyllic and idealist; Donne's is passionate and realistic to the point of cynicism. To read him after reading Browne and Jonson is to have the same shock as reading Browning after Tennyson. Both poets are salutary in the strong and biting antidote they bring to sentimentalism in thought and melodious facility in writing. They are the corrective of lazy thinking and lazy composition.

Elizabethan love poetry was written on a convention which, though it was used with manliness and entire sincerity by Sidney, did not escape the fate of its kind. Dante's love for Beatrice, Petrarch's for Laura, the gallant and passionate adoration of Sidney for his Stella, became the models for a dismal succession of imaginary woes. They were all figments of the mind, perhaps hardly that; they all use the same terms and write in fixed strains, epicurean and sensuous like Ronsard, ideal and intellectualized like Dante, sentimental and adoring like Petrarch. Into this enclosed garden of sentiment and illusion Donne burst passionately and rudely, pulling up the gay-

JOHN DONNE.

From a painting in the Dyce & Foster collection.

coloured tangled weeds that choked thoughts, planting, as one of his followers said, the seeds of fresh invention. Where his forerunners had been idealist, epicurean, or adoring, he was brutal, cynical, and immitigably realist. He could begin a poem, "For God's sake hold your tongue and let me love"; he could be as resolutely free from illusion as Shakespeare when he addressed his Dark Lady—

> "Hope not for mind in women; at their best,
> Sweetness and wit they're but mummy possest."

And where the sonneteers pretended to a sincerity which was none of theirs, he was, like Browning, unaffectedly a dramatic lyrist. "I did best," he said, "when I had least truth for my subject."

His love poetry was written in his turbulent and brilliant youth, and the poetic talent which made it turned in his later years to express itself in hymns and religious poetry. But there is no essential distinction between the two halves of his work. It is all of a piece. The same swift and subtle spirit which analyses experiences of passion, analyses, in his later poetry, those of religion. His devotional poems, though they probe and question, are none the less never sermons, but rather confessions or prayers. His intense individuality, eager always, as his best critic has said,[1]

[1] Prof. H. J. C. Grierson in the *Cambridge History of English Literature*. His criticism there and his recent edition of Donne's poetical works have added immeasurably to our knowledge of the poet.

"to find a North-West passage of his own," pressed its curious and sceptical questioning into every corner of love and life and religion, explored unsuspected depths, exploited new discovered paradoxes, and turned its discoveries always into poetry of the closely-packed artificial style which was all its own. Simplicity indeed would have been for him an affectation; his elaborateness is not like that of his followers, constructed painfully in a vicious desire to compass the unexpected, but the natural overflow of an amazingly fertile and ingenious mind. The curiosity, the desire for truth, the search after minute and detailed knowledge of his age, is all in his verse. He bears the spirit of his time not less markedly than Bacon does, or Newton, or Descartes.

The work of the followers of Donne and Jonson leads straight to the new school, Jonson's by giving that school a model on which to work, Donne's by producing an era of extravagance and absurdity which made a literary revolution imperative. The school of Donne—the "fantastics" as they have been called (Dr Johnson called them the metaphysical poets)—produced in Herbert and Vaughan, our two noblest writers of religious verse, the flower of a mode of writing which ended in the somewhat exotic religiousness of Crashaw. In the hands of Cowley the use of far-sought and intricate imagery became a trick, and the fantastic school, the soul of sincerity gone out of it, died when he

died. To the followers of Jonson we owe that delightful and simple lyric poetry which fills our anthologies, their courtly lyricism receiving a new impulse in the intenser loyalty of troubled times. The most finished of them is perhaps Carew; the best, because of the freshness and variety of his subject-matter and his easy grace, Herrick. At the end of them came Waller and gave to the five-accented rhymed verse (the heroic couplet) that trick of regularity and balance which gave us the classical school.

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The prose literature of the seventeenth century is extraordinarily rich and varied, and a study of it would cover a wide field of human knowledge. The new and unsuspected harmonies discovered by the Elizabethans were applied indeed to all the tasks of which prose is capable, from telling stories to setting down the results of the speculation which was revolutionizing science and philosophy. For the first time the vernacular and not Latin became the language of scientific research, and though Bacon in his *Novum Organum* adhered to the older mode, its disappearance was rapid. English was proving itself too flexible an instrument for conveying ideas to be longer neglected. It was applied too to preaching of a more formal and grandiose kind than the plain and homely Latimer ever dreamed of. The preachers, though their golden-

mouthed oratory, which blended in its combination of vigour and cadence the euphuistic and colloquial styles of the Elizabethans, is in itself a glory of English literature, belong by their matter too exclusively to the province of Church history to be dealt with here. The men of science and philosophy, Newton, Hobbes, and Locke, are in a like way outside our province. For the purpose of the literary student the achievement of the seventeenth century can be judged in four separate men or books—in the Bible, in Francis Bacon, and in Burton and Browne.

In a way the Bible, like the preachers, lies outside the domain of literary study in the narrow sense; but its sheer literary magnitude, the abiding significance of it in our subsequent history, social, political, and artistic as well as religious, compel us to turn aside to examine the causes that have produced such great results. The Authorized Version is not, of course, a purely seventeenth-century work. Though the scholars[1] who wrote and compiled it had before them all the previous vernacular texts and chose the best readings where they found them or devised new ones in accordance with the original, the basis is undoubtedly the Tudor version of Tindall. It has, none the less, the qualities of the time of its publication. It could hardly have been done earlier; had it been

[1] There is a graphic little pen-picture of their method in Selden's *Table Talk*.

so, it would not have been done half so well. In it English has lost both its roughness and its affectation and retained its strength; the Bible is the supreme example of early English prose style. The reason is not far to seek. Of all recipes for good or noble writing that which enjoins the writer to be careful about the matter and never mind the manner, is the most sure. The translators had the handling of matter of the gravest dignity and momentousness, and their sense of reverence kept them right in their treatment of it. They cared passionately for the truth; they were virtually anonymous and not ambitious of originality or literary fame; they had no desire to stand between the book and its readers. It followed that they cultivated that naked plainness and spareness which makes their work supreme. The Authorized Version is the last and greatest of those English translations which were the fruit of Renaissance scholarship and pioneering. It is the first and greatest piece of English prose.

Its influence is one of those things on which it is profitless to comment or enlarge simply because they are an understood part of every man's experience. In its own time it helped to weld England, for where before one Bible was read at home and another in churches, all now read the new version. Its supremacy was instantaneous and unchallenged, and it quickly coloured speech and literature; it could produce a Bunyan in the

century of its birth. To it belongs the native dignity and eloquence of peasant speech. It runs like a golden thread through all our writing subsequent to its coming; men so diverse as Huxley and Carlyle have paid their tribute to its power; Ruskin counted it the one essential part of his education. It will be a bad day for the mere quality of our language when it ceases to be read.

At the time the translators were sitting, Francis Bacon was at the height of his fame. By profession a lawyer—time-serving and over-compliant to wealth and influence—he gives singularly little evidence of it in the style of his books. Lawyers, from the necessity they are under of exerting persuasion, of planting an unfamiliar argument in the minds of hearers of whose favour they are doubtful, but whose sympathy they must gain, are usually of purpose diffuse. They cultivate the gift, possessed by Edmund Burke above all other English authors, of putting the same thing freshly and in different forms a great many times in succession. They value copiousness and fertility of illustration. Nothing could be more unlike this normal legal manner than the style of Bacon. "No man," says Ben Jonson, speaking in one of those vivid little notes of his, of his oratorical method, "no man ever coughed or turned aside from him without loss." He is a master of the aphoristic style. He compresses his wisdom into the quintessential form of an epigram; so complete

and concentrated is his form of statement, so shortly is everything put, that the mere transition from one thought to another gives his prose a curious air of disjointedness as if he flitted arbitrarily from one thing to another, and jotted down anything that came into his head. His writing has clarity and lucidity, it abounds in terseness of expression and in exact and discriminating phraseology, and in the minor arts of composition—in the use of quotations, for instance —it can be extraordinarily felicitous. But it lacks spaciousness and ease and rhythm; it makes too inexorable a demand on the attention, and the harassed reader soon finds himself longing for those breathing spaces which consideration or perhaps looseness of thought has implanted in the prose of other writers.

His *Essays*, the work by which he is best known, were in their origin merely jottings gradually cohered and enlarged into the series we know. In them he had the advantage of a subject which he had studied closely through life. He counted himself a master in the art of managing men, and "Human Nature and how to manage it" would be a good title for his book. Men are studied in the spirit of Machiavelli, whose philosophy of government appealed so powerfully to the Elizabethan mind. Taken together, the essays which deal with public matters are in effect a kind of manual for statesmen and princes, in-

structing them how to acquire power and how to keep it, deliberating how far they may go safely in the direction of self-interest, and to what degree the principle of self-interest must be subordinated to the wider interests of the people who are ruled. Democracy, which in England was to make its splendid beginnings in the seventeenth century, finds little to foretell it in the works of Bacon. Though he never advocates cruelty or oppression and is wise enough to see that no statesman can entirely set aside moral considerations, his ethical tone is hardly elevating; the moral obliquity of his public life is to a certain extent explained, in all but its grosser elements, by his published writings. The essays, of course, contain much more than this; the spirit of curious and restless enquiry which animated Bacon finds expression in those on "Health," or "Gardens," and "Plantations," and others of the kind; and a deeper vein of earnestness runs through some of them—those for instance on "Friendship," or "Truth," and on "Death."

The *Essays* sum up in a condensed form the intellectual interests which find larger treatment in his other works. His *Henry VII.*, the first piece of scientific history in the English language (indeed in the modern world) is concerned with a king whose practice was the outcome of a political theory identical with Bacon's own. The *Advancement of Learning* is a brilliant popular exposition

of the cause of scientific enquiry and of the inductive or investigatory method of research. The *New Atlantis* is the picture of an ideal community whose common purpose is scientific investigation. Bacon's name is not upon the roll of those who have enlarged by brilliant conjectures or discoveries the store of human knowledge; his own investigations so far as they are recorded are all of a trivial nature. The truth about him is that he was a brilliantly clever populariser of the cause of science, a kind of seventeenth-century Huxley, concerned rather to lay down large general principles for the guidance of the work of others, than to be a worker in research himself. The superstition of later times, acting on and refracting his amazing intellectual gifts, has raised him to a godlike eminence which is by right none of his; it has even credited him with the authorship of Shakespeare's plays, and in its wilder moments with the composition of all that is of supreme worth in Elizabethan literature. It is not necessary to take these delusions seriously. The ignorance of mediævalism was in the habit of crediting Vergil with the construction of the Roman aqueducts and temples whose ruins are scattered over Europe. The modern Baconians reach much the same intellectual level.

A similar enthusiasm for knowledge and at any rate a pretence to science belong to the author of the *Anatomy of Melancholy*, Robert Burton. His one book is surely the most amazing in English

prose. His professed object was simple and comprehensive; it was to analyse human melancholy, to describe its effects, and prescribe for its removal. But as his task grew, melancholy came to mean to Burton all the ills that flesh is heir to. He tracked it in obscure and unsuspected forms; drew illustrations from a range of authors so much wider than the compass of the reading of even the most learned since, that he has until lately been commonly credited with the invention of a large part of his quotations. Ancients and moderns, poets and prose writers, schoolmen and dramatists are all drawn upon for the copious store of his examples; they are always cited with an air of quietly humorous shrewdness in the comments and enclosed in a prose that is straightforward, simple and vigorous, and can on occasion command both rhythm and beauty of phrase. It is a mistake to regard Burton from the point of view (taught us first by Charles Lamb) of tolerant or loving delight in quaintness for quaintness' sake. His book is anything but scientific in form, but it is far from being the work of a recluse or a fool. Behind his lack of system, he takes a broad and psychologically an essentially just view of human ills, and modern medicine has gone far in its admiration of what is at bottom a most comprehensive and subtle treatise in diagnosis.

A writer of a very different quality is Sir Thomas Browne. Of all the men of his time, he is the only

one of whom one can say for certain that he held the manner of saying a thing more important than the thing said. He is our first deliberate and conscious stylist, the forerunner of Charles Lamb, of Stevenson (whose *Virginibus Puerisque* is modelled on his method of treatment) and of the stylistic school of our own day. His eloquence is too studied to rise to the greatest heights, and his speculation, though curious and discursive, never really results in deep thinking. He is content to embroider his pattern out of the stray fancies of an imaginative nature. His best known work, the *Religio Medici*, is a random confession of belief and thoughts, full of the inconsequent speculations of a man with some knowledge of science but not deeply or earnestly interested about it, content rather to follow the wayward imaginations of a mind naturally gifted with a certain poetic quality, than to engage in serious intellectual exercise. Such work could never maintain its hold on taste if it were not carefully finished and constructed with elaborate care. Browne, if he was not a great writer, was a literary artist of a high quality. He exploits a quaint and lovable egoism with extraordinary skill; and though his delicately figured and latinized sentences commonly sound platitudinous and trivial when they are translated into rough Saxon prose, as they stand they are rich and melodious enough. Bunyan belongs rather to the special history of the novel, and it will be con-

venient to postpone dealing with him till we reach it.

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In a century of surpassing richness in prose and poetry, one author stands by himself. John Milton refuses to be classed with any of the schools. Though Dryden tells us Milton confessed to him that Spenser was his "original," he has no connection—other than a general similarity of purpose, moral and religious—with Spenser's followers. To the "fantastics" he paid in his youth the doubtful compliment of one or two half-contemptuous imitations and never touched them again. He had no turn for the love lyrics or the courtliness of the school of Jonson. In everything he did he was himself and his own master; he devised his own subjects and wrote his own style. He stands alone and must be judged alone.

No author, however, can ever escape from the influences of his time, and, just as much as his lesser contemporaries, Milton has his place in literary history and derives from the great original impulse which set in motion all the enterprises of the century. He is the last and greatest figure in the English Renaissance. The new passion for art and letters which in its earnest fumbling beginnings gave us the prose of Cheke and Ascham and the poetry of Surrey and Sackville, comes to a full and splendid and perfect end in his work. In it the Renaissance and the Reformation, imperfectly fused

by Sidney and Spenser, blend in their just proportions. The transplantation into English of classical forms, which had been the aim of Sidney and the endeavour of Jonson, he finally accomplished; in his work the dream of all the poets of the Renaissance—the "heroic" poem—finds its fulfilment. There was no poet of the time but wanted to do for his country what Vergil had planned to do for Rome, to sing its origins, and to celebrate its morality and its citizenship in the epic form. Spenser had tried it in *The Faerie Queen* and failed splendidly. Where he failed, Milton succeeded, though his poem is not on the origins of England but on the ultimate subject of the origins of mankind. We know from his notebooks that he turned over in his mind a national subject and that the Arthurian legend for a while appealed to him. But to Milton's earnest temper nothing that was not true was a fit subject for poetry. It was inevitable he should lay it aside. The Arthurian story he knew to be a myth, and a myth was a lie; the story of the Fall, on the other hand, he accepted in common with his time for literal fact. It is to be noted as characteristic of his confident and assured egotism that he accepted no less sincerely and literally the imaginative structure which he himself reared on it. However that may be, the solid fact about him is that in this "adventurous song" with its pursuit of

"Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme,"

he succeeded in his attempt, that alone among the moderns he contrived to write an epic which stands on the same eminence as the ancient writings of the kind, and that he found time, in a life which hardly extended to old age as we know it, to write, besides noble lyrics and a series of fiercely argumentative prose treatises, two other masterpieces in the grand style, a tragedy modelled on the Greeks and a second epic on the "compact" style of the book of Job. No English poet can compare with him in majesty or completeness.

An adequate study of his achievement is impossible within the limits of the few pages that are all a book like this can spare to a single author. Readers who desire it will find it in the work of his two best critics, Mark Pattison and Prof. Walter Raleigh.[1] All that can be done here is to call attention to some of his most striking qualities. Foremost, of course, is the temper of the man. From the beginning he was sure of himself and sure of his mission; he had his purpose plain and clear. There is no mental development, hardly, visible in his work, only training, undertaken anxiously and prayerfully and with a clearly conceived end. He designed to write a masterpiece and he would not start till he was ready. The first twenty years of his life were spent in assiduous reading; for twenty more he was immersed in the dust and toil of political conflict, using his pen

[1] "Milton" (E.M.L.), and "Milton" (Edward Arnold).

and his extraordinary equipment of learning and eloquence to defend the cause of liberty, civil and religious, and to attack its enemies; not till he was past middle age had he reached the leisure and the preparedness necessary to accomplish his self-imposed work. But all the time, as we know, he had it in his mind, and he used every form of self-discipline, physical and intellectual, to fit himself for its accomplishment. "Long it was not," he could write, "when I was confirmed in this opinion, that he who would not be frustrate of his hope to write well hereafter in laudable things, ought himself to be a true poem; that is a composition and pattern of the best and honourablest things; not presuming to sing high praises of heroic men, or famous cities, unless he have in himself the experience and practice of all that which is praiseworthy." In *Lycidas*, written in his Cambridge days, he apologizes to his readers for plucking the fruit of his poetry before it is ripe. In passage after passage in his prose works he begs for his reader's patience for a little while longer till his preparation be complete. When the time came at last for beginning he was in no doubt; in his very opening lines he intends, he says, to soar no "middle flight." This self-assured unrelenting certainty of his, carried into his prose essays in argument, produces sometimes strange results. One is peculiarly interesting to us now in view of current controversy. He was unhappily married, and because he

was unhappy the law of divorce must be changed. A modern—George Eliot for instance—would have pleaded the artistic temperament and been content to remain outside the law. Milton always argued from himself to mankind at large. His wife would not talk to him, and so, an incorrigible "muteness" and a desertion such as hers was to be a general ground of divorce.

In everything he did, he put forth all his strength. Each of his poems, long or short, is by itself a perfect whole, wrought complete. The reader always must feel that the planning of each is the work of conscious, deliberate, and selecting art. Milton never digresses; he never violates the harmony of sound or sense; his poems have all their regular movement, from quiet beginning through a rising and breaking wave of passion and splendour to quiet close. His art is nowhere better seen than in his endings.

Is it *Lycidas*? After the thunder of approaching vengeance on the hireling shepherds of the Church, comes sunset and quiet:

> "And now the sun had stretch'd out all the hills,
> And now was dropt into the western bay;
> At last he rose, and twitched his mantle blue:
> To-morrow to fresh woods and pastures new."

Is it *Paradise Lost*? After the agonies of expulsion and the flaming sword—

> "Some natural tears they drop'd, but wip'd them soon;
> The world was all before them where to choose

Their place of rest, and Providence their guide;
They hand in hand with wandering steps and slow,
Through Eden took their solitary way."

Is it, finally, *Samson Agonistes*?

"His servants he with new acquist,
Of true experience from this great event,
With peace and consolation hath dismist,
And calm of mind, all passion spent."

"Calm of mind, all passion spent," it is the essence of Milton's art.

Yet Milton would not have assented to any criticism which sought to regard him merely as an artist. His prose works are avowedly polemical in character; so in a certain sense is *Samson Agonistes*; *Paradise Lost* starts with an avowed dogmatic aim; openly intending to

"Assert eternal providence,
And justify the ways of God to man."

It intends, that is, to deal with the dark and difficult problem of human destiny; to explain man's disobedience and the fruit of it, to make clear heaven's purposes and man's failure to come up to them, and to give us such a conception of things divine and human as we can sincerely accept, trust, and believe in. To what extent does Milton succeed in this aim? A modern reader finds the question difficult to answer without offence. To the vaguer and less certain way of thinking which the nineteenth century taught us, his scheme of the universe appears inconceivably

artificial, and it is difficult to understand how he could have believed in the reality of something so obviously the result of his own ingenuity as his "geography" (if an extension of the word be permitted) of heaven and hell. In some ways his life incapacitated him from approaching his subject from our modern point of view. A scholar by upbringing and profession, and solitary in his old age, his business in his prime fixed his attention on great affairs, and if he was not an actor in revolution he was at least a servant and confidant of the actors. He had watched with eager sympathy arduous political debate, of a kind more momentous than anything of the kind could be to us now, and he knew how surely, when something bigger and more instant than the mere clash of party is afoot, what is said will mirror the mind of the speaker. It is this vivid experience shining through it which gives reality and force to the second book of his great poem, when Satan and his followers hold their council in Hell. Without it, this part of the poem could not possibly have been so magnificent and awe-inspiring; but without it the poem as a whole might have been more easily accepted by posterity in its contents, as well as in its style. The truth is, Milton made the Fall of the Angels a political transaction, and though the exigencies of his subject forced him for once to be on the side of absolute monarchy, his latent enthusiasm for revolt made him make the rebellious element—Satan and his

crew—more interesting, and so disturbed the balance of his poem. "Satan may have been wrong, but on Milton's theory he had an arguable case at least. There was something arbitrary in the promotion; there were little symptoms of a job; in *Paradise Lost* it is always clear that the devils are the weaker, but it is never clear that the angels are the better. Milton's sympathy and his imagination slip back to the Puritan rebels whom he loved, and desert the courtly angels whom he could not love although he praised."[1]

Dr Johnson said that, after all, *Paradise Lost* was one of the books which no one wished larger; probably he was right. But "after all," too, what book in the whole range of modern literature is really greater? What other poet has devised a style so full and dignified, so firm and continuous in its music, so fitted to keep out the intrusion of mean associations which might imperil the seriousness of its theme, so impregnated with a moral and artistic tenacity, so compact of sublimity and strength?

[1] Walter Bagehot: Essay on Milton.

CHAPTER V

THE AGE OF GOOD SENSE

(1)

The student of literature, when he passes in his reading from the age of Shakespeare and Milton to that of Dryden and Pope, will be conscious of certain sharply defined differences between the temper and styles of the writers of the two periods. If besides being a student of literature he is also a student of literary criticism, he will find that these differences have led to the affixing of certain labels—that the school to which writers of the former period belong is called "Romantic" and that of the latter "Classic," this "Classic" school being again overthrown towards the end of the eighteenth century by a set of writers who, unlike the Elizabethans, gave the name "Romantic" to themselves. What is he to understand by these two labels? what are the characteristics of "Classicism," and how far is it opposite to and conflicting with "Romanticism"? The question is difficult because the names are used vaguely and they do not adequately cover everything that is commonly put under them. It would be difficult,

for instance, to find anything in Ben Jonson which proclaims him as belonging to a different school from Dryden, and perhaps the same could be said in the second and self-styled period of Romanticism of the work of Crabbe. But in the main the differences are real and easily visible, even though they hardly convince us that the names chosen are the happiest that could be found by way of description.

This period of Dryden and Pope on which we are now entering sometimes styled itself the Augustan Age of English poetry. It grounded its claim to Classicism on a fancied resemblance to the Roman poets of the golden age of Latin poetry, the reign of the Emperor Augustus. Its authors saw themselves each as a second Vergil, a second Ovid, most of all a second Horace, and they believed that their relation to the big world, their assured position in society, heightened the resemblances. They endeavoured to form their poetry on the lines laid down in the critical writing of the original Augustan age as elaborated and interpreted in Renaissance criticism. It was tacitly assumed—some of them openly asserted it—that the kinds, modes of treatment and all the minor details of literature, figures of speech, use of epithets and the rest, had been settled by the ancients once and for all. What the Greeks began the critics and authors of the time of Augustus had settled in its completed form, and the scholars of the Renaissance had only interpreted their findings for

modern use. There was the tragedy, which had certain proper parts and a certain fixed order of treatment laid down for it; there was the heroic poem, which had a story or "fable," which must be treated in a certain fixed manner, and so on. The authors of the "Classic" period so christened themselves because they observed these rules. And they fancied that they had the temper of the Augustan time—the temper displayed in the works of Horace more than in those of anyone else—its urbanity (English literature in their hands became for the first time an affair of the towns), its love of good sense and moderation, its instinctive distrust of emotion, and its invincible good breeding. If you had asked them to state as simply and broadly as possible their purpose, they would have said it was to follow nature; and if you had enquired what they meant by nature, it would turn out that they thought of it mainly as the opposite of art and the negation of what was fantastic, tortured, or far-sought in thinking or writing. The later "Romantic" Revival, when it called itself a return to nature, was only claiming the intention which the classical school itself had proclaimed as its main endeavour. The explanation of that paradox we shall see presently; in the meantime it is worth looking at some of the characteristics of Classicism as they appear in the work of the "Classic" authors.

In the first place the "Classic" writers aimed at

simplicity of style, at a normal standard of writing. They were intolerant of individual eccentricities; they endeavoured, and with success, to infuse into English letters something of the academic spirit that was already controlling their fellow-craftsmen in France. For this end amongst others they and the men of science founded the Royal Society, an academic committee which has been restricted since to the physical and natural sciences and been supplemented by similar bodies representing literature and learning only in our own day. Clearness, plainness, conversational ease and directness were the aims the society set before its members where their writing was concerned. "The Royal Society," wrote the Bishop of Rochester, its first historian, "have exacted from all their members a close, naked, natural way of speaking; positive expressions, clear sense, a native easiness, bringing all things as near the mathematical plainness as they can; and preferring the language of artisans, countrymen, and merchants before that of wits and scholars." Artisans, countrymen, and merchants—the ideal had been already accepted in France, Malesherbes striving to use no word that was not in the vocabulary of the day labourers of Paris, Molière making his washerwoman first critic of his comedies. It meant for England the disuse of the turgidities and involutions which had marked the prose of the preachers and moralists of the times of James and Charles I.; scholars and men

of letters were arising who would have taken John Bunyan, the unlettered tinker of Bedford, for their model rather than the learned physician, Sir Thomas Browne.

But genius like Bunyan's apart, there is nothing in the world more difficult than to write with the easy and forthright simplicity of talk, as anyone may see who tries for himself, or even compares the letter-writing with the conversation of his friends. So that this desire for simplicity, for clarity, for lucidity led at once to a more deliberate art. Dryden and Swift and Addison were assiduous in their labour with the file; they excel all their predecessors in polish as much as the writers of the first Augustan age excelled theirs in the same quality. Not that it was all the result of deliberate art; in a way it was in the air, and quite unlearned people—journalists and pamphleteers and the like who wrote unpremeditatedly and hurriedly to buy their supper—partook of it as well as leisured people and conscious artists. Defoe is as plain and easy and polished as Swift, yet it is certain his amazing activity and productiveness never permitted him to look back over a sentence he had written. Something had happened, that is, to the English language. The assimilation of latinisms and the revival of obsolete terms of speech had ceased; it had become finally a more or less fixed form, shedding so much of its imports as it had failed to make part of itself and acquiring

ALEXANDER POPE.

From the portrait by W. Hoare in the National Portrait Gallery.

a grammatical and syntactical fixity which it had not possessed in Elizabethan times. When Shakespeare wrote

"What cares these roarers for the name of king,"

he was using, as students of his language never tire of pointing out to us, a perfectly correct local grammatical form. Fifty years after that line was written, at the Restoration, local forms had dropped out of written English. We had acquired a normal standard of language, and either genius or labour was polishing it for literary uses.

What they did for prose these "Classic" writers did even more exactly — and less happily — for verse. Fashions often become exaggerated before their disappearance, and the decadence of Elizabethan romanticism had produced poetry the wildness and extravagance of whose images was well-nigh unbounded. The passion for intricate and far-sought metaphor which had possessed Donne was accompanied in his work, and even more in that of his followers, with a passion for what was elusive and recondite in thought and emotion and with an increasing habit of rudeness and wilful difficultness in language and versification. Against these ultimate licences of a great artistic period, the classical writers invoked the qualities of smoothness and lucidity, in the same way, so they fancied, as Vergil might have invoked them against Lucretius. In the treatment of

thought and feeling they wanted clearness, they wanted ideas which the mass of men would readily apprehend and assent to, and they wanted not hints or half-spoken suggestions but complete statement. When they spoke of following nature this was what they meant. In the place of the logical subtleties which Donne and his school had sought in the scholastic writers of the Middle Ages, they brought back the typically Renaissance study of rhetoric; the characteristic of all the poetry of the period is that it has a rhetorical quality. It is never intimate and never profound, but it has point and wit, and it appeals with confidence to the balanced judgment which men who distrust emotion and have no patience with subtleties intellectual, emotional, or merely verbal, have in common. Alongside of this lucidity, this air of complete statement in substance, they strove for and achieved smoothness in form. To the poet Waller, the immediate predecessor of Dryden, the classical writers themselves ascribed the honour of the innovation. In fact Waller was only carrying out the ideals counselled and followed by Ben Jonson. It was in the school of Waller and Dryden and not in that of the minor writers who called themselves his followers that he came to his own.

What then are the main differences between Classicism of the best period—the Classicism whose characteristics we have been describing—and the

Romanticism which came before and after? In the first place we must put the quality we have described as that of complete statement. Classical poetry is, so to speak, "all there." Its meaning is all of it on the surface; it conveys nothing but what it says, and what it says, it says completely. It is always vigorous and direct, often pointed and aphoristic, never merely suggestive, never given to half statement, and never obscure. You feel that as an instrument of expression it is sharp and polished and shining; it is always bright and defined in detail. The great Romantics go to work in other ways. Their poetry is a thing of half lights and half-spoken suggestions, of hints that imagination will piece together, of words that are charged with an added meaning of sound over sense, a thing that stirs the vague and impalpable restlessness of memory or terror or desire that lies down beneath in the minds of men. It rouses what a philosopher has called the "transcendental feeling," the solemn sense of the immediate presence of "that which was and is and ever shall be," to induce which is the property of the highest poetry. You will find nothing in classical poetry so poignant or highly wrought as Webster's

"Cover her face; mine eyes dazzle; she died young,"

and the answer,

"I think not so: her infelicity
Seemed to have years too many,"

or so subtle in its suggestion, the sense of what is said echoing back to primeval terrors and despairs, as this from *Macbeth*:

> "Stones have been known to move and trees to speak;
> Augurs and understood relations have
> By magot-pies, and choughs, and rooks brought forth
> The secret'st man of blood";

or so intoxicating to the imagination and the senses as an ode of Keats or a sonnet by Rossetti. But you will find eloquent and pointed statements of thoughts and feelings that are common to most of us—the expression of ordinary human nature—

> "What oft was thought but ne'er so well exprest."

"Wit and fine writing" consisting, as Addison put it in a review of Pope's first published poem, not so much "in advancing things that are new, as in giving things that are known an agreeable turn."

Though in this largest sense the "Classic" writers eschewed the vagueness of Romanticism, in another and more restricted way they cultivated it. They were not realists as all good Romanticists have to be. They had no love for oddities or idiosyncrasies or exceptions. They loved uniformity, they had no use for truth in detail. They liked the broad, generalized, descriptive style of Milton, for instance, better than the closely packed style of Shakespeare, which gets its effects from a series of minute observations huddled one after the other and giving

the reader, so to speak, the materials for his own impression, rather than rendering, as Milton does, the expression itself.

Every literary discovery hardens ultimately into a convention; it has its day and then its work is done, and it has to be destroyed so that the ascending spirit of humanity can find a better means of self-expression. Out of the writing which aimed at simplicity and truth to nature grew "poetic diction," a special treasury of words and phrases deemed suitable for poetry, providing poets with a common stock of imagery, removing from them the necessity of seeing life and nature each one for himself. The poetry which Dryden and Pope wrought out of their mental vigour, their followers wrote to pattern. Poetry became reduced, as it had hardly been before and has never been since, to a formula. The Elizabethan sonneteers, as we saw, used a vocabulary and phraseology in common with their fellows in Italy and France, and none the less produced fine poetry. But they used it to express things they really felt. The truth is it is not the fact of a poetic diction which matters so much as its quality—whether it squares with sincerity, whether it is capable of expressing powerfully and directly one's deepest feelings. The history of literature can show poetic dictions—special vocabularies and forms for poetry—that have these qualities; the diction, for instance, of the Greek choruses, or of the ballad-makers, or of the Scottish

poets who followed Chaucer, or of the troubadours. That of the classic writers of an Augustan age was not of such a kind. Words clothe thought; poetic diction had the artifice of the crinoline: it would stand by itself. The Romantics in their return to nature had necessarily to abolish it.

But when all is said in criticism, the poetry of the earlier half of the eighteenth century excels all other English poetry in two respects. Two qualities belong to it by virtue of the metre in which it is most of it written—rapidity and antithesis. Its antithesis made it an incomparable vehicle for satire, its rapidity for narrative. Outside its limits we have hardly any even passable satirical verse; within them there are half a dozen works of the highest excellence in this kind. And if we except Chaucer, there is no one else in the whole range of English poetry who has the narrative gift so completely as the classic poets. Bentleys will always exist who will assure us with civility that Pope's *Homer*, though "very pretty," bears little relation to the Greek, and that Dryden's *Vergil*, though vigorous and virile, is a poor representation of its original. The truth remains that for a reader who knows no ancient languages either of those translations will probably give a better idea of its original than any other rendering in English that we possess. The foundation of their method has been vindicated in the best modern translations from the Greek.

(2)

The term "eighteenth century" in the vocabulary of the literary historian is commonly as vaguely used as the term Elizabethan. It borrows as much as forty years from the seventeenth and gives away ten to the nineteenth. The whole of the work of Dryden, whom we must count as the first of the "Classic" school, was accomplished before chronologically it had begun. As a man and as an author he was very intimately related to his changing times; he adapted himself to them with a versatility as remarkable as that of the Vicar of Bray, and hardly less simple-minded. He mourned in verse the death of Cromwell and the death of his successor, successively defended the theological positions of the Church of England and the Church of Rome, changed his religion and became Poet Laureate to James II., and acquiesced with perfect equanimity in the Revolution which brought in his successor. This instability of conviction, though it gave a handle to his opponents in controversy, does not appear to have caused any serious scandal or disgust among his contemporaries, and it has certainly had little effect on the judgment of later times. It has raised none of the reproaches which have been cast at the suspected apostasy of Wordsworth. Dryden had little interest in political or religious questions; his instinct, one must conceive, was to conform

to the prevailing mode and to trouble himself no further about the matter. Defoe told the truth about him when he wrote that "Dryden might have been told his fate that, having his extraordinary genius slung and pitched upon a swivel, it would certainly turn round as fast as the times, and instruct him how to write elegies to Oliver Cromwell and King Charles the Second with all the coherence imaginable; how to write *Religio Laici* and the *Hind and the Panther* and yet be the same man, every day to change his principle, change his religion, change his coat, change his master, and yet never change his nature." He never changed his nature, he was as free from cynicism as a barrister who represents successively opposing parties in suits or politics; and when he wrote polemics in prose or verse he lent his talents as a barrister lends his for a fee. His one intellectual interest was in his art, and it is in his comments on his art—the essays and prefaces in the composition of which he amused the leisure left in the busy life of a dramatist and a poet of officialdom—that his most charming and delicate work is to be found. In a way they begin modern English prose; earlier writing furnishes no equal to their colloquial ease and the grace of their expression. And they contain some of the most acute criticism in our language—"Classical" in its tone (*i.e.* with a preference for conformity) but with its respect for order and tradition always

tempered by good sense and wit, and informed and guided throughout by a taste whose catholicity and sureness was unmatched in the England of his time. The preface to his *Fables* contains some excellent notes on Chaucer. They may be read as a sample of the breadth and perspicuity of his critical perceptions.

His chief poetical works were most of them occasional — designed either to celebrate some remarkable event or to take a side and interpret a policy in the conflict, political or religious, of the time. *Absalom and Achitophel* and *The Medal* were levelled at the Shaftesbury-Monmouth intrigues in the closing years of Charles II. *Religio Laici* celebrated the excellence of the Church of England in its character of *via media* between the opposite extravagances of Papacy and Presbyterianism. *The Hind and the Panther* found this perfection spotted. The Church of England has become the Panther, whose coat is a varied pattern of heresy and truth beside the spotless purity of the Hind, the Church of Rome. *Astrea Redduc* welcomed the returning Charles; *Annus Mirabilis* commemorated a year of fire and victories. Besides these he wrote many dramas in verse, a number of translations, and some shorter poems, of which the odes are the most remarkable.

His qualities as a poet fitted very exactly the work he set himself to do. His work is always

plain and easily understood; he had a fine faculty for narration, and the vigorous rapidity and point of his style enabled him to sketch a character or sum up a dialectical position very surely and effectively. His writing has a kind of spare and masculine force about it. It is this vigour and the impression which he gives of intellectual strength and of a logical grasp of his subject, that beyond question has kept alive work which, if ever poetry was, was ephemeral in its origin. The careers of the unscrupulous Caroline peers would have been closed for us were they not visible in the reflected light of his denunciation of them. Though Buckingham is forgotten and Shaftesbury's name swallowed up in that of his more philanthropic descendant, we can read of Achitophel and Zimri still, and feel something of the strength and heat which he caught from a fiercely fought conflict and transmitted with his own gravity and purposefulness into verse. The Thirty-nine Articles are not a proper subject for poetry, but the sustained and serious allegory which Dryden weaves round theological discussion preserves his treatment of them from the fate of the controversialists who opposed him. His work has wit and vitality enough to keep it sweet.

Strength and wit enter in different proportions into the work of his successor, Alexander Pope—a poet whom admirers in his own age held to be the greatest in our language. No one would think

of making such a claim now, but the detraction which he suffered at the hands of Wordsworth and the Romantics ought not to make us forget that Pope, though not our greatest, not even perhaps a great poet is incomparably our most brilliant versifier. Dryden's strength turns in his work into something more fragile and delicate, polished with infinite care like lacquer, and wrought like filigree work to the last point of conscious and perfected art. He was not a great thinker; the thoughts which he embodies in his philosophical poems—the *Essay on Man* and the rest—are almost ludicrously out of proportion to the solemnity of the titles which introduce them, nor does he except very rarely get beyond the conceptions common to the average man when he attempts introspection or meditates on his own destiny. The reader in search of philosophy will find little to stimulate him, and in the facile Deism of the time probably something to smile at. Pope has no message to us now. But he will find views current in his time or borrowed from other authors put with perfect felicity and wit, and he will recognize the justice of Addison's comment that Pope's wit and fine writing consist "not so much in advancing things that are new, as in giving things that are known an agreeable turn." Nor will he fall into the error of dubbing the author a minor poet because he is neither subtle nor imaginative nor profound. A great poet would not have written

like Pope—one must grant it; but a minor poet could not.

It is characteristic of Pope's type of mind and kind of art that there is no development visible in his work. Other poets—Shakespeare, for instance, and Keats—have written work of the highest quality when they were young, but they have had crudenesses to shed, things to get rid of as their strength and perceptions grew. But Pope, like Minerva, was full grown and full armed from the beginning. If we did not know that his *Essay on Criticism* was his first poem it would be impossible to place it in the canon of his work; it might come in anywhere and so might everything else that he wrote. From the beginning his craftsmanship was perfect; from the beginning he took his subject-matter from others as he found it and worked it up into aphorism and epigram till each line shone like a cut jewel and the essential commonplaceness and poverty of his material was obscured by the glitter the craftsmanship lent to it. He was quite sure of his medium from the beginning, and when the opportunity came he used it to most brilliant purpose. *The Rape of the Lock* and the satirical poems come later in his career.

As a satirist Pope, though he did not hit so hard as Dryden, struck more deftly and probed deeper. He wielded a rapier where the other used a broadsword, and though both used their weapons with the highest skill and the metaphor must not be

imagined to impute clumsiness to Dryden, the rapier made the cleaner cut. Both employed a method in satire which their successors (a poor set) in England have not been intelligent enough to use. They allow every possible good point to the object of their attack. They appear to deal him an even and regretful justice. His good points, they put it in effect, being so many, how much blacker and more deplorable his meannesses and faults! They do not do this out of charity; there was very little of the milk of human kindness in Pope. Deformity in his case, as in so many in fiction, seemed to carry with it a certain malevolence and meanness of disposition. The method is employed simply because it gives the maximum satirical effect. That is why Pope's epistle to Arbuthnot, with its characterization of Addison, is the most damning piece of invective in our language.

The Rape of the Lock is an exquisite piece of workmanship, breathing the very spirit of the time. You can fancy it like some clock made by one of the Louis XIV. craftsmen, encrusted with a heap of ormulu mock-heroics and impertinences and set perfectly to the time of day. From no other poem could you gather so fully and perfectly the temper of the society in which our "classic" poetry was brought to perfection, its elegant assiduity in trifles, its brilliant artifice, its paint and powder and patches and high-heeled shoes, its measured

strutting walk in life as well as in verse. *The Rape of the Lock* is a mock-heroic poem; that is to say it applies the form and treatment which the "classic" critics of the seventeenth century had laid down as belonging to the "heroic" or "epic" style to a trifling circumstance—the loss by a young lady of fashion of a lock of hair. And it is the one instance in which this "recipe" for a heroic poem which the French critics handed on to Dryden, and Dryden left to his descendants, has been used well enough to keep the work done with it in memory. In a way it condemns the poetical theory of the time; when forms are fixed, new writing is less likely to be creative and more likely to exhaust itself in the ingenious but trifling exercises of parody and burlesque. *The Rape of the Lock* is brilliant, but it is only play.

The accepted theory which assumed that the forms of poetry had been settled in the past and existed to be applied, though it concerned itself mainly with the ancient writers, included also two moderns in its scope. You were orthodox if you wrote tragedy and epic as Horace told you and satire as he had shown you; you were also orthodox if you wrote in the styles of Spenser or Milton. Spenser, though his predecessors were counted barbaric and his followers tortured and obscure, never fell out of admiration; indeed in every age of English poetry after him the greatest poet in it is always to be found copying him or expressing

their love for him—Milton declaring to Dryden that Spenser was his "original," Pope reading and praising him, Keats writing his earliest work in close imitation. His characteristic style and stanza were recognized by the classic school as a distinct "kind" of poetry which might be used where the theme fitted instead of the heroic manner, and Spenserian imitations abound. Sometimes they are serious; sometimes, like Shenstone's *Schoolmistress*, they are mocking and another illustration of the dangerous ease with which a conscious and sustained effort to write in a fixed and acquired style runs to seed in burlesque. Milton's fame never passed through the period of obscurity that sometimes has been imagined for him. He had the discerning admiration of Dryden and others before his death. But to Addison belongs the credit of introducing him to the writers of this time; his papers in the *Spectator* on *Paradise Lost*, with their eulogy of its author's sublimity, spurred the interest of the poets among his readers. From Milton the eighteenth century got the chief and most ponderous part of its poetic diction, high-sounding periphrases and borrowings from Latin used without the gravity and sincerity and fullness of thought of the master who brought them in. When they wrote blank verse, the classic poets wrote it in the Milton manner.

The use of these two styles may be studied in the writings of one man, James Thomson. For

besides acquiring a kind of anonymous immortality with patriots as the author of "Rule, Britannia," Thomson wrote two poems respectively in the Spenserian and the Miltonic manner, the former *The Castle of Indolence*, the latter *The Seasons*. The Spenserian manner is caught very effectively, but the adoption of the style of *Paradise Lost*, with its allusiveness, circumlocution and weight, removes any freshness the *Seasons* might have had, had the circumstances in them been put down as they were observed. As it is, hardly anything is directly named; birds are always the "feathered tribe" and everything else has a similar polite generality for its title. Thomson was a simple-minded man, with a faculty for watching and enjoying nature which belonged to few in his sophisticated age; it is unfortunate he should have spent his working hours in rendering the fruit of country rambles freshly observed into a cold and stilted diction. It suited the eighteenth-century reader well, for not understanding nature herself, he was naturally obliged to read her in translations.

(3)

The chief merits of "Classic" poetry—its clearness, its vigour, its direct statement—are such as belong theoretically rather to prose than to poetry. In fact, it was in prose that the most vigorous intellect of the time found itself. We have seen how Dryden, reversing the habit of other poets,

succeeded in expressing his personality not in poetry, which was his vocation, but in prose, which was the amusement of his leisure hours. Spenser had put his politics into prose and his ideals into verse; Dryden wrote his politics—to order—in verse, and in prose set down the thoughts and fancies which were the deepest part of him because they were about his art. The metaphor of parentage, though honoured by use, does not always fit literary history well; none the less, the tradition which describes him as the father of modern English prose is very near the truth. He puts into practice for the first time the ideals, described in the first chapter of this book, which were set up by the scholars who let into English the light of the Renaissance. With the exception of the dialogue on Dramatic Poesy, his work is almost all of it occasional, the fruit of the mood of a moment, and written rather in the form of a *causerie*, a kind of informal talk, than of a considered essay. And it is all couched in clear, flowing, rather loosely jointed English, carefully avoiding rhetoric and eloquence and striving always to reproduce the ease and flow of cultured conversation, rather than the tighter, more closely knit style of consciously "literary" prose. His methods were the methods of the four great prose-writers who followed him—Defoe, Addison, Steele, and Swift.

Of these, Defoe was the eldest and in some ways the most remarkable. He has been called the

earliest professional author in our language, and if that is not strictly true, he is at any rate the earliest literary journalist. His output of work was enormous; he wrote on any and every subject; there was no event, whether in politics or letters or discovery, but he was ready with something pat on it before the public interest faded. It followed that a time when imprisonment, mutilation, and the pillory took the place of our modern libel actions he had an adventurous career. In politics he followed the Whig cause and served the Government with his pen, notably by his writings in support of the union with Scotland, in which he won over the Scots by his description of the commercial advantage which would follow the abolition of the border. This line of argument, taken at a time when the governing of political tendencies by commercial interests was by no means the accepted commonplace it is now, proves him a man of an active and original mind. His originality, indeed, sometimes overreached the comprehension both of the public and his superiors; he was imprisoned for an attack on the Hanoverian succession which was intended ironically; apparently he was ignorant of what every journalist ought to know, that irony is at once the most dangerous and the least effectual weapon in the whole armoury of the press. The fertility and ingenuity of his intellect may be best gauged by the number of modern enterprises and contrivances that are foreshadowed

in his work. Here are a few, all utterly unknown in his own day, collected by a student of his works: a Board of Trade register for seamen; factories for goods; agricultural credit banks; a commission of enquiry into bankruptcy; and a system of national poor relief. They show him to have been an independent and courageous thinker where social questions were concerned.

He was nearly sixty before he had published his first novel, *Robinson Crusoe*, the book by which he is universally known, and on which with the seven other novels which followed it the best part of his literary fame rests. But his earlier works—they are reputed to number over two hundred—possess no less remarkable literary qualities. It is not too much to say that all the gifts which are habitually recommended for cultivation by those who aspire to journalistic success are to be found in his prose. He has in the first place the gift of perfect lucidity no matter how complicated the subject he is expounding; such a book as his *Complete English Tradesman* is full of passages in which a complex and difficult subject-matter is set forth so plainly and clearly that the least literate of his readers could have no doubt of his understanding it. He has also an amazingly exact acquaintance with the technicalities of all kinds of trades and professions; none of our writers, not even Shakespeare, shows half such a knowledge of the circumstances of life among different ranks and

conditions of men; none of them has realized with such fidelity how so many different persons lived and moved. His gift of narrative and description is masterly, as readers of his novels know (we shall have to come back to it in discussing the growth of the English novel); several of his works show him to have been endowed with a fine faculty of psychological observation. Without the least consciousness of the value of what he was writing, nor indeed with any deliberate artistic intention, he made himself one of the masters of English prose.

Defoe had been the champion of the Whigs; on the Tory side the ablest pen was that of Jonathan Swift. His works proclaim him to have had an intellect less wide in its range than that of his antagonist, but more vigorous and powerful. He wrote, too, more carefully. In his youth he had been private secretary to Sir William Temple, a writer now as good as forgotten because of the triviality of his matter, but in his day esteemed because of the easy urbanity and polish of his prose. From him Swift learned the labour of the file, and he declared in later life that it was "generally believed that this author has advanced our English tongue to as great a perfection as it can well bear." In fact, he added to the ease and cadences he had learned from Temple qualities of vigour and directness of his own which put his work far above his master's. And he dealt with

JONATHAN SWIFT.

From a painting by C. Jervas in the National Portrait Gallery.

more important subject-matter than the academic exercises on which Temple exercised his fastidious and meticulous powers of revision.

In temperament he is opposed to all the writers of his time. There is no doubt but there was some radical disorder in his system; brain disease clouded his intellect in his old age, and his last years were death in life; right through his life he was a savagely irritable, sardonic, dark and violent man, impatient of the slightest contradiction or thwarting, and given to explosive and instantaneous rage. He delighted in flouting convention, gloried in outraging decency. The rage, which, as he said himself, tore his heart out, carried him to strange excesses. There is something ironical (he would himself have appreciated it) in the popularity of *Gulliver's Travels* as a children's book—"that ascending wave of savagery and satire which overwhelms policy and learning to break against the ultimate citadel of humanity itself." In none of his contemporaries (except perhaps in the sentimentalities of Steele) can one detect the traces of emotion; to read Swift is to be conscious of intense feeling on almost every page. The surface of his style may be smooth and equable, but the central fires of passion are never far beneath, and through cracks and fissures come intermittent bursts of flame. Defoe's irony is so measured and studiously commonplace that perhaps those who imprisoned him because they believed him to be serious are

hardly to be blamed; Swift's quivers and reddens with anger in every line.

But his pen seldom slips from the strong grasp of his controlling art. The extraordinary skill and closeness of his allegorical writings—unmatched in their kind—is witness to the care and sustained labour which went to their making. He is content with no general correspondences; his allegory does not fade away into a story in which only the main characters have a secondary significance; the minutest circumstances have a bearing in the satire and the moral. In *The Tale of a Tub* and in *Gulliver's Travels*—particularly in the former—the multitude as well as the aptness of the parallels between the imaginary narrative and the facts it is meant to represent is unrivalled in works of the kind. Only the highest mental powers, working with intense fervour and concentration, could have achieved the sustained brilliancy of the result. "What a genius I had when I wrote that book!" Swift is said to have exclaimed in his old age when he re-read *The Tale of a Tub*, and certainly the book is a marvel of constructive skill, all the more striking because it makes allegory out of history and consequently is denied that freedom of narrative so brilliantly employed in the *Travels*.

Informing all his writings too, besides intense feeling and an omnipresent and controlling art, is strong common sense. His aphorisms, both those collected under the heading of *Thoughts on*

Various Subjects, and countless others scattered up and down his pages, are a treasury of sound, if a little sardonic, practical wisdom. His most insistent prejudices foreshadow in their essential sanity and justness those of that great master of life, Dr Johnson. He could not endure over-politeness, a vice which must have been very oppressive in society of his day. He savagely resented and condemned a display of affection—particularly marital affection—in public. In an age when it was the normal social system of settling quarrels, he condemned duelling; and he said some very wise things —things that might still be said—on the problem of education. In economics he was as right-hearted as Ruskin and as wrong-headed. Carlyle, who was in so many respects an echo of him, found in a passage in his works a "dim anticipation" of his philosophy of clothes.

The leading literary invention of the period—after that of the heroic couplet for verse—was the prose periodical essay. Defoe, it is hardly necessary to say, began it; it was his nature to be first with any new thing: but its establishment as a prevailing literary mode is due to two authors, Joseph Addison and Richard Steele. Of the two famous series—the *Tatler* and the *Spectator*—for which they were both responsible, Steele must take the first credit; he began them, and though Addison came in and by the deftness and lightness of his writing took the lion's share of their popularity, both the plan and

the characters round whom the bulk of the essays in the *Spectator* came to revolve was the creation of his collaborator. Steele we know very intimately from his own writings and from Thackeray's portrait of him. He was an emotional, full-blooded kind of man, reckless and dissipated but fundamentally honest and good-hearted—a type very common in his day as the novels show, but not otherwise to be found in the ranks of its writers. What there is of pathos and sentiment, and most of what there is of humour in the *Tatler* and the *Spectator*, are his. And he created the *dramatis personæ* out of whose adventures the slender thread of continuity which binds the essays together is woven. Addison, though less open to the onslaughts of the conventional moralist, was a less lovable personality. Constitutionally endowed with little vitality, he suffered mentally as well as bodily from languor and lassitude. His lack of enthusiasm, his cold-blooded formalism, caused comment even in an age which prided itself in self-command and decorum.

His occasional malevolence (if the word be not too strong) proceeded from a flaccidity which seemed to envy the activities and enthusiasms of other men. As a writer he was superficial; he had not the energy necessary for forming a clear or profound judgment on any question of difficulty; Johnson's comment, "He thinks justly but he thinks faintly," sums up the truth about him. His

good qualities were of a slighter kind than Swift's; he was a quiet and accurate observer of manners and fashions in life and conversation, and he had the gift of a style — what Johnson calls "The Middle Style" — very exactly suited to the kind of work on which he was habitually engaged, "always equable, always easy, without glowing words or pointed sentences," but polished, lucid, and urbane.

Steele and Addison were conscious moralists as well as literary men. They desired to purge society of the Restoration licence; to their efforts we must credit the alteration in morality which *The School for Scandal* shows over *The Way of the World.* Their professed object, as they stated themselves, was "to banish vice and ignorance out of the territories of Great Britain" (nothing less!) "and to bring philosophy out of closets and libraries, schools and colleges, to dwell in clubs and assemblies, at tea-tables and coffee-houses." In fact, their satires were politically nearer home, and the chief objects of their aversion were the Tory squires whom it was their business as Whigs to deride. On the Coverley papers in the *Spectator* rests the chief part of their literary fame; these belong rather to the special history of the novel than to that of the periodical essay.

CHAPTER VI

DR JOHNSON AND HIS TIME

By 1730 the authors whose work made the "classic" school in England were dead or had ceased writing; by the same date Samuel Johnson had begun his career as a man of letters. The difference between the period of his maturity and the period we have been examining is not perhaps easy to define; but it exists and it can be felt unmistakably in reading. For one thing, "Classicism" had become completely naturalized; it had ceased to regard the French as arbiters of elegance and literary taste; indeed Johnson himself never spoke of them without disdain, and hated them as much as he hated Scotsmen. Writing, like dress and the common way of life, became plainer and graver and thought stronger and deeper. In manners and speech something of the brutalism which was at the root of the English character at the time began to colour the refinement of the preceding age. Dilettantism gave way to learning and speculation; in the place of Bolingbroke came Adam Smith; in the place of Addison, Johnson. In a way, it is the solidest and sanest time in English letters. Yet in

the midst of its urbanity and order forces were gathering for its destruction. The ballad-mongers were busy; Johnson was scarcely dead before Blake was drawing and rhyming and Burns was giving songs and lays to his country-side. In the distance—Johnson could not hear them—sounded, like the horns of elf-land faintly blowing, the trumpet-calls of romance.

If the whole story of Dr Johnson's life were the story of his published books it would be very difficult to understand his pre-eminent and symbolic position in literary history. His best-known work —it still remains so—was his dictionary, and dictionaries, for all the licence they give and Johnson took for the expression of a personality, are the business of purely mechanical talents. A lesser man than he might have cheated us of such delights as the definitions of "oats," or "net," or "pension," but his book would certainly have been no worse as a book. Yet the dictionary has an importance of its own in the history of our literature, for it was the first systematic attempt to do for the English tongue what the labours of the academy did for French, and it is the foundation on which succeeding edifices of research have been built. Johnson's other works were miscellaneous in character. He tried as many forms of writing as a modern dilettante, though nothing was more alien to his character than mere dilettantism. Poetry, plays, journalism, the novel, biography, travel,

letters, all gained something from his hand, though nothing remarkable. In his early years he wrote two satires in verse in imitation of Juvenal; they were followed later by two series of periodical essays on the model of the *Spectator;* neither of them—the *Rambler* nor the *Idler*—were at all successful. *Rasselas*, a tale with a purpose, is melancholy reading; the *Journey to the Western Hebrides* has been utterly eclipsed by Boswell's livelier and more human chronicle of the same events. The *Lives of the Poets*, his greatest work, was composed with pain and difficulty when he was seventy years old; even it is but a quarry from which a reader may dig the ore of a sound critical judgment summing up a life's reflection, out of the grit and dust of perfunctory biographical compilations. There was hardly one of the literary coterie over which he presided that was not doing better and more lasting work. Nothing that Johnson wrote is to be compared, for excellence in its own manner, with *Tom Jones* or the *Vicar of Wakefield* or the *Citizen of the World.* He produced nothing in writing approaching the magnitude of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, or the profundity of Burke's philosophy of politics. Even Sir Joshua Reynolds, whose main business was painting and not the pen, was almost as good an author as he; his *Discourses* have little to fear when they are set beside Johnson's essays. Yet all these men recognized him as their guide

and leader; the spontaneous selection of such a democratic assembly as men of genius in a tavern fixed upon him as chairman, and we in these later days, who are safe from the overpowering force of personality and presence—or at least can only know of it reflected in books—instinctively recognize him as the greatest man of his age. What is the reason?

Johnson's pre-eminence is the pre-eminence of character. He was a great moralist; he summed up in himself the tendencies of thought and literature of his time and excelled all others in his grasp of them; and he was perhaps more completely than anyone else in the whole history of English literature, the typical Englishman. He was one of those to whom is applicable the commonplace that he was greater than his books. It is the fashion nowadays among some critics to speak of his biographer Boswell as if he were a novelist or a playwright and to classify the Johnson we know with Hamlet and Don Quixote as the product of creative or imaginative art, working on a "lost original." No exercise of critical ingenuity could be more futile or impertinent. The impression of the solidity and magnitude of Johnson's character which is to be gathered from Boswell is enforced from other sources; from his essays and his prayers and meditations, from the half-dozen or so lives and reminiscences which were published in the years following his death (their very number

establishing the reverence with which he was regarded), from the homage of other men whose genius their books leave indisputable. Indeed, the Johnson we know from Boswell, though it is the broadest and most masterly portrait in the whole range of biography, gives less than the whole magnitude of the man. When Boswell first met him at the age of twenty-two, Johnson was fifty-four. His long period of poverty and struggle was past. His *Dictionary* and all his works except the *Lives of the Poets* were behind him; a pension from the Crown had established him in security for his remaining years; his position was universally acknowledged. So that though the portrait in the *Life* is a full-length study of Johnson the conversationalist and literary dictator, the proportion it preserves is faulty, and its study of the early years—the years of poverty, of the *Vanity of Human Wishes* and *London*, of *Rasselas*, which he wrote to pay the expenses of his mother's funeral—is slight.

It was, however, out of the bitterness and struggle of these early years that the strength and sincerity of character which carried Johnson surely and tranquilly through the time of his triumph were derived. From the beginning he made no compromise with the world and no concession to fashion. The world had to take him at his own valuation or not at all. He never deviated one hair's-breadth from the way he had chosen.

DR SAMUEL JOHNSON.

From a painting by John Opie in the National Portrait Gallery.

Judged by the standards of journalistic success, the *Rambler* could not well be worse than he made it. Compared with the lightness and gaiety and the mere lip-service to morality of Addison, its edification is ponderous. Both authors state the commonplaces of conduct, but Addison achieves lightness in the doing of it, and his manner, by means of which platitudes are stated lightly and pointedly and with an air of novelty, is the classic manner of journalism. Johnson goes heavily and directly to the point, handling well-worn moral themes in general and dogmatic language without any attempt to enliven them with an air of discovery or surprise. Yet they were, in a sense, discoveries to him; not one of them but was deeply and sincerely felt; not one but is not a direct and to us a pathetically dispassionate statement of the reflection of thirty years of grinding poverty and a soul's anguish. Viewed in the light of his life, the *Rambler* is one of the most moving of books. If its literary value is slight, it is a document in character.

So that when he came to his own, when gradually the public whom he despised and neglected raised him into a pontifical position matched by none before him in England and none since save Carlyle, he was sure of himself; success did not spoil him. His judgment was unwarped by flattery. The almost passionate tenderness and humanity which lay beneath his gruffness was undimmed. His per-

sonality triumphed in all the fullness and richness which had carried it in integrity through his years of struggle. For over twenty years from his chair in taverns in the Strand and Fleet Street he ruled literary London, imposed his critical principles on the great body of English letters, and by his talk and his friendships became the embodiment of the literary temperament of his age.

His talk as it is set down by Boswell is his best monument. It was the happiest possible fate that threw those two men together, for Boswell, besides being an admirer and reporter sedulously chronicling all his master said and did, fortunately influenced both the saying and the doing. Most of us have someone in whose company we best shine, who puts our wits on their mettle and spurs us to our greatest readiness and vivacity. Boswell, for all his assumed humility and for all Johnson's affected disdain, was just such a companion for Johnson. Johnson was at his best when Boswell was present. Boswell not only drew Johnson out on subjects in which his robust common sense and readiness of judgment were fitted to shine, but he was at pains to lure him into situations in which he might display himself to advantage. It was the biographer who suggested and conducted that tour in Scotland which gave Johnson an opportunity for displaying himself at his best. The recorded talk is extraordinarily varied and entertaining. It is a mistake to conceive Johnson as a monster of bear-

like rudeness, shouting down opposition, hectoring his companions, and habitually a blustering verbal bully. We are too easily hypnotized by Macaulay's impression, and that is too near caricature. He could be merciless in argument and often wrong-headed, and he was always acute, uncomfortably acute, in his perception of a fallacy, and a little disconcerting in his unmasking of pretence. But he could be gay and tender too, and in his heart he was a shrinking and sensitive man.

As a critic (his criticism is the only side of his literary work that need be considered), Johnson must be allowed a high place. His natural indolence in production had prevented him from exhausting his faculties in the more exacting labours of creative work, and it had left him time for omnivorous if desultory reading, the fruits of which he stored in a wonderfully retentive memory against an occasion for their use. To a very fully equipped mind he brought the service of a robust and acute judgment. Moreover, when he applied his mind to a subject he had a faculty of intense, if fitful concentration; he could seize with great force on the heart of a matter; he had the power in a wonderfully short time of extracting the kernel and leaving the husk. His judgments in writing are like those recorded by Boswell from his conversation; that is to say, he does not, as a critic whose medium was normally the pen rather than the tongue would tend to do, search for fine shades

of distinction, subdivide subtleties, or be careful to admit *caveats* or exceptions; he passes, on the contrary, rapid and forcible verdicts, not seldom in their assertions untenably sweeping, and always decided and dogmatic. He never affects diffidence or defers to the judgments of others. His power of concentration, of seizing on essentials, has given us his best critical work—nothing could be better, for instance, than his characterization of the poets whom he calls the metaphysical school (Donne, Crashaw, and the rest), which is the most valuable part of his life of Cowley. Even where he is most prejudiced—for instance in his attack on Milton's *Lycidas*—there is usually something to be said for his point of view. And after this concentration, his excellence depends on his basic common sense. His classicism is always tempered, like Dryden's, by a humane and sensible dislike of pedantry; he sets no store by the unities; in his preface to Shakespeare he allows more than a "classic" could have been expected to admit, writing in it, in truth, some of the manliest and wisest things in Shakespearean literature. Of course, he had his failings—the greatest of them what Lamb called imperfect sympathy. He could see no good in republicans or agnostics, and none in Scotland or France. Not that the phrase "imperfect sympathy," which expresses by implication the romantic critic's point of view, would have appealed to him. When Dr Johnson did not like people, the fault

was in them, not in him; a ruthless objectivity is part of the classic equipment. He failed, too, because he could neither understand nor appreciate poetry which concerned itself with the sensations that come from external nature. Nature was to him a closed book, very likely for a purely physical reason. He was short-sighted to the point of myopia, and a landscape meant nothing to him; when he tried to describe one, as he did in the chapter on the "happy valley" in *Rasselas*, he failed. What he did not see he could not appreciate; perhaps it is too much to ask of his self-contained and unbending intellect that he should appreciate the report of it by other men.

(2)

As we have seen, Johnson was not only great in himself, he was great in his friends. Round him, meeting him as an equal, gathered the greatest and most prolific writers of the time. There is no better way to study the central and accepted men of letters of the period than to take some full evening at the club from Boswell, read a page or two, watch what the talkers said, and then trace each back to his own works for a complete picture of his personality. The lie of the literary landscape in this wonderful time will become apparent to you as you read. You will find Johnson enthroned, Boswell at his ear, round him men like Reynolds and Burke, Richardson

and Fielding and Goldsmith, Robertson and Gibbon, and occasionally drawn to the circle minnows like Beattie and a genius like Adam Smith. Gray, studious in his college at Cambridge, is exercising his fastidious talent; Collins' sequestered, carefully nurtured muse is silent; a host of minor poets are riding Pope's poetic diction and heroic couplet to death. Outside scattered about is the van of Romance — Percy collecting his ballads; Burns omnivorously reading the "bards" of his countryside; the "mad" people, Smart and Chatterton, obscurely beginning the work that was to come full-blown in Blake and finish in Wordsworth and Coleridge and Keats.

Of Johnson's set the most remarkable figure was Edmund Burke—"the supreme writer," as De Quincey called him, "of his century." His writings belong more to the history of politics than to that of literature, and a close examination of them would be out of place here. His political theory strikes a middle course which offends—and in his own day offended—both parties in the common strife of political thinking. He believed the best government to consist in a patriotic aristocracy, ruling for the good of the people. By birth an Irishman, he had the innate practicality which commonly lies beneath the flash and colour of Irish forcefulness and rhetoric. That, and his historical training, which influenced him in the direction of conceiving every institution as the

culmination of an evolutionary development, sent him directly counter to the newest and most enthusiastically urged political philosophy of his day—the philosophy stated by Rousseau, and put in action by the French Revolution. He disliked and distrusted "metaphysical theories," when they left the field of speculation for that of practice, had no patience with "natural rights" (which as an Irishman he conceived as the product of sentimentalism), and applied what would nowadays be called a "pragmatic" test to political affairs. Practice was the touch-stone; a theory was useless unless you could prove that it had worked. It followed that he was not a democrat, opposed parliamentary reform, and held that the true remedy for corruption and venality was not to increase the size of the electorate, but to reduce it so as to obtain electors of greater weight and independence. For him a member of Parliament was a representative and not a delegate, and must act not on his elector's wishes but on his own judgment. These opinions are little in fashion in our own day, but it is well to remember that in Burke's case they were the outcome not of prejudice but of thought, and that even democracy may admit they present a case that must be met and answered.

Burke's reputation as a thinker has suffered somewhat unjustly as a result of his refusal to square his tenets either with democracy or with its opposite.

It has been said that ideas were only of use to him so far as they were of polemical service, that the amazing fertility and acuteness of his mind worked only in a not too scrupulous determination to overwhelm his antagonists in the several arguments—on India, or America, on Ireland, or on France—which made up his political career. He was, said Carlyle, "vehement rather than earnest; a resplendent far-sighted rhetorician, rather than a deep and earnest thinker." The words as they stand would be a good description of a certain type of politician; they would fit, for instance, very well on Mr Gladstone; but they do Burke less than justice. He was an innovator in modern political thought, and his application of the historical method to the study of institutions is in its way a not less epoch-making achievement than Bacon's application of the inductive method to science. At a time when current political thought, led by Rousseau, was drawing its theories from the abstract conception of "natural rights," Burke was laying down that sounder and deeper notion of politics which has governed thinking in that department of knowledge since. Besides this, he had face to face with the affairs of his own day a far-sightedness and sagacity which kept him right where other men went wrong. In a nation of the blind he saw the truth about the American colonies; he predicted with exactitude the culmination of the revolution in Napoleon. Mere rhetorical vehemence cannot

explain the earnestness with which in a day of diplomatic cynicism he preached the doctrine of an international morality as strict and as binding as the morality which exists between man and man. Surest of all, we have the testimony, uninfluenced by the magic of language, of the men he met. You could not, said Dr Johnson, shelter with him in a shed for a few moments from the rain without saying, "This is an extraordinary man."

His literary position depends chiefly on his amazing gift of expression, on a command of language unapproached by any writer of his time. His eloquence (in writing, not in speaking; he is said to have had a monotonous delivery) was no doubt at bottom a matter of race, but to his Irish readiness and fire and colour he added the strength of a full mind, fortified by a wonderful store of reading which a retentive and exact memory enabled him to bring instantly to bear on the subject in hand. No writer before him, except Defoe, had such a wide knowledge of the technicalities of different men's occupations, and of all sorts of the processes of daily business, nor could enlighten an abstract matter with such a wealth of luminous analogy. It is this characteristic of his style which has led to the common comparison of his writing with Shakespeare's; both seem to be preternaturally endowed with more information, to have a wider sweep of interest than ordinary men. Both were not only, as Matthew Arnold said of Burke, "saturated with

ideas," but saturated too in the details of the business and desire of ordinary men's lives; nothing human was alien to them. Burke's language is, therefore, always interesting and always appropriate to his thought; it is also on occasion very beautiful. He had a wonderful command of clear and ringing utterance and could appeal when he liked very powerfully to the sensibilities of his readers. Rhetoricians are seldom free from occasional extravagance, and Burke fell under the common danger of his kind. He had his moments of falsity, could heap coarse and outrageous abuse on Warren Hastings, illustrate the horrors of the Revolution by casting a dagger on the floor of the House of Commons, and nourish hatred beyond the bounds of justice or measure. But these things do not affect his position, nor take from the solid greatness of his work.

Edward Gibbon—after Burke the greatest prose writer of the century—was Johnson's junior by over quarter of a century, and, living and working much abroad, he made only fitful excursions into the Fleet Street set. A word about his education and upbringing is necessary because of their remarkable bearing on his great book. In his childhood he was sickly; he was therefore never sent to school, and what knowledge he acquired he got from a faculty for omnivorous and desultory reading to which temporary masters and a sister of his mother's gave occasional direction. At

fifteen he was entered at Magdalen College, Oxford, but left it after little more than a year's residence—during which he had been converted to the Church of Rome—for Lausanne, to live under a Swiss Protestant pastor to whom his father entrusted him, in order to effect his re-conversion to the Protestant faith. The immediate purpose was successful, but the five years which he spent in Lausanne were perhaps more important because it was during them that he began to carry out conscientiously, and indeed joyously, that course of reading and study which was to be the foundation of the great work of his life. At the age of twenty-four he returned to England and became a captain in the Hampshire Militia, in which he served for nearly three years. As he himself has pointed out in a famous passage, this military service, no less than his reading in Switzerland, contributed to preparing him for the great work of his life. "The discipline and conditions of a modern battalion gave me a clear notion of the phalanx and the legion; and the captain of the Hampshire grenadiers (the reader may smile) has not been useless to the historian of the Roman Empire." In 1763, at the conclusion of peace after the Seven Years' War, the militia was disbanded, and Gibbon revisited the continent and made his first journey in Italy. Here he hit upon the idea which gave him his great book. "It was at Rome," as he says himself, "on the 15th October, 1764, as I sat musing amidst

the ruins of the capitol while the barefooted friars were singing vespers in the temple of Jupiter, that the idea of writing the decline and fall of the city first entered into my mind." Twelve years later the first volume—one-sixth of the whole—appeared, and made its author famous. A century and a half of laborious historical research since has left his fame undimmed; the *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* is still the standard book on its subject, and it would be hard to think of a competitor, whether ancient or modern, entitled to dispute with it the first place in the whole of historical literature.

The qualities which have given the book its permanence and pre-eminence are not difficult to divine, though only one side of them concerns our purpose here. It is agreed by those competent to judge that he performed the astonishing feat of mastering all the vast materials which were available to him, that he kept them in an ordered proportion in his mind, that he showed wonderful acumen and judgment in his critical use of them, and that on points which they left obscure, and which subsequent discussions have elucidated, his inferences were generally—almost invariably—correct. But this fullness and correctness, though it would have preserved him from obsolescence as a text-book and maintained his fame in the universities, would not have made him the great literary figure that he is. He owes that partly to the mere magnitude of the

task which he accomplished, partly to the temper in which he approached it, and partly to the style in which he carried it through. "A great point in favour of Gibbon," says one of his best critics with some humour, "is the existence of his history," and indeed in this matter he stands alone amongst modern historians. Think of Macaulay struggling with masses of material, overwhelmed with the weight of newspapers, pamphlets, state-papers, and despatches, and leaving his great work a mere fragment of what he intended to do. Modern historical research has given the attempt up in frank despair; it finds so much to read that it has no time to write; a single monograph on such a thing as Gibbon would have compressed into one balanced sentence exhausts the energies of its professors, and when it attempts universal history it does so on a co-operative basis. Gibbon conceived a plan as voluminous as any of those devised by the learned syndicates of to-day, embracing the greatest transition in history, the foundation of modern civilization and the growth and establishment of the world's two chief religions, and he carried it through to the end, preserving absolutely the proportion with which he began. Parts of his book, taken out of it by themselves, might have given him an eminence almost as great as did the whole. "It is melancholy to say it," wrote Cardinal Newman, "but the chief, perhaps the only English writer who has any claim to be considered an

ecclesiastical historian, is Gibbon." This of his two chapters on Christianity and his later sections on the heresies and the crusades, but a similar tribute might be paid to his picture of the barbarian invasions which destroyed the Empire of the West, or to the complete history of the rise and decline of that of the East with which his book ends. He excels, as no historian had before him and none since, in magnitude and completeness.

It was the bent of his mind, the temper in which he approached men and institutions, as much as his industry, that enabled him to attain this excellence. He had what may be called a masculine tone; a firm, strong, perspicuous narration of matter of fact, a capacity for plain argument, a contempt for everything which plain and definite people could not thoroughly comprehend. He had, too, what was characteristic of his age, a certain classical moderation of judgment which saved him from the idiosyncrasies of likes and dislikes which have damaged the work of other historians, like, for instance, Mommsen or Froude. "The cautious scepticism of his cold intellect, which disinclined him to every extreme, depreciates great virtues and extenuates great vices." He does not engage himself on a side; the irony which critics of his chapters on Christianity found offensive is in all the other chapters as well and lends them just that detachment, that command over the circumstances he is describing, that keeps the reader's interest alive

where mere bald narration would soon leave it cold. He feels that you are entitled to some definite judgment, some finding on the facts, and he sees to it that this finding is balanced and judicial, allowing due weight to all points of view. It is, of course, this temper and bent of mind which created more than anything else the peculiar style which we know so well. Space and time pressed upon him; judgments had therefore to be conveyed by an epithet rather than a sentence, by a sentence rather than by a paragraph. The history had to keep marching along, and it is perhaps the greatest merit of its style that it gives you just this sense of consistent steady pace, "like a Roman legion marching through troubled country—a type of order and an emblem of civilisation." Certainly no instrument could have been better fitted to the purpose. No one has improved on it since.

Boswell we have seen; after Burke and Boswell, Goldsmith was the most brilliant member of the regular Johnson circle. If part of Burke's genius is referable to his nationality, Goldsmith's is wholly so. The beginning and the end of him was Irish; every quality he possessed as a man and as a writer belongs to his race. He had the Irish carelessness, the Irish generosity, the Irish quick temper, the Irish humour. This latter gift, displayed constantly in a company which had little knowledge of the peculiar quality of Irish wit and no faculty of sympathy or imagination, is at the bottom of the

constant depreciation of him on the part of Boswell and others of his set. His mock self-importance they thought ill-breeding; his humorous self-depreciation and keen sense of his own ridiculousness, mere lack of dignity and folly. It is curious to read Boswell and watch how often Goldsmith, without Boswell's knowing it, got the best of the joke. In writing he had what we can now recognize as peculiarly Irish gifts. All our modern writers of light half-farcical comedy are Irish. Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* is only the first of a series which includes *The School for Scandal*, *The Importance of being Earnest*, and *You Never can Tell*. And his essays—particularly those of the *Citizen of the World* with its Chinese vision of England and English life—are the first fruit of that Irish detachment, that ability to see "normally" English habits and institutions and foibles which in our own day has given us the prefaces of Mr Shaw. As a writer Goldsmith has a lightness and delicate ease which belong rather to the school of the earlier eighteenth century than to his own day; the enthusiasm of Addison for French literature which he retained gave him a more graceful model than the "Johnsonian" school, to which he professed himself to belong, could afford.

(3)

The eighteenth-century novel demands separate treatment, and the other prose authors belong to

historical or philosophical rather than to literary studies. It is time to turn to poetry.

There orthodox classicism still held sway: the manner and metre of Pope or Thomson ruled the roost of singing fowl. In the main it had done its work, and the bulk of fresh things conceived in it were dull and imitative, even though occasionally, as in the poems of Johnson himself and of Goldsmith, an author arose who was able to infuse sincerity and emotion into a fast-dying convention. The classic manner—now more that of Thomson than of Pope—persisted till it overlapped romanticism; Cowper and Crabbe each owe a doubtful allegiance, leaning by their formal metre and level monotony of thought to the one and by their realism to the other. In the meantime its popularity and its assured position were beginning to be assailed in the coteries by the work of two new poets.

The output of Thomas Gray and William Collins was small; you might almost read the complete poetical works of either in an evening. But for all that they mark a period; they are the first definite break with the classic convention which had been triumphant for upwards of seventy years when their prime came. It is a break, however, in style rather than in essentials, and a reader who seeks in them the inspiriting freshness which came later with Wordsworth and Coleridge will be disappointed. Their carefully drawn still wine

tastes insipidly after the "beaded bubbles winking at the brim" of romance. They are fastidious and academic; they lack the authentic fire; their poetry is "made" poetry like Tennyson's and Matthew Arnold's. On their comparative merits a deal of critical ink has been spilt. Arnold's characterization of Gray is well known—"he never spoke out." Sterility fell upon him because he lived in an age of prose just as it fell upon Arnold himself because he lived too much immersed in business and routine. But in what he wrote he had the genuine poetic gift—the gift of insight and feeling. Against this, Swinburne with characteristic vehemence raised the standard of Collins, the latchet of whose shoe Gray, as a lyric poet, was not worthy to unloose. "The muse gave birth to Collins, she did but give suck to Gray." It is more to our point to observe that neither, though their work abounds in felicities and in touches of a genuine poetic sense, was fitted to raise the standard of revolt. Revolution is for another and braver kind of genius than theirs. Romanticism had to wait for Burns and Blake.

In every country at any one time there are in all probability not one but several literatures flourishing. The main stream flowing through the publishers and booksellers, conned by critics and coteries, recognized as the national literature, is commonly only the largest of several channels of thought. There are besides the national literature

local literatures — books, that is, are published which enjoy popularity and critical esteem in their own county or parish and are utterly unknown outside; there may even be (indeed, there are in several parts of the country) distinct local schools of writing and dynasties of local authors. These localized literatures rarely become known to the outside world; the national literature takes little account of them, though their existence and probably some special knowledge of one or other of them is within the experience of most of us. But every now and again some one of their authors transcends his local importance, gives evidence of a genius which is not to be denied even by those who normally have not the knowledge to appreciate the particular flavour of locality which his writings impart, and becomes a national figure. While he lives and works the national and his local stream write and flow together.

This was the case of Robert Burns. All his life long he was the singer of a parish—the last of a long line of forebears who had used the Scottish lowland vernacular to rhyme in about their neighbours and their scandals, their loves and their church. Himself at the confluence of the two streams, the national and the local, he pays his tribute to two sets of originals, talks with equal reverence of names known to us like Pope and Gray and Shenstone and names unknown which belonged to local "bards," as he would have called

them, who wrote their poems for an Ayrshire public. If he came upon England as an innovator, it was simply because he brought with him the highly individualized style of Scottish local vernacular verse; to his own people he was no innovator but a fulfilment; as his best critic[1] says, he brought nothing to the literature he became a part of but himself. His daring and splendid genius made the local universal, raised out of rough and cynical satirizing a style as rich and humorous and astringent as that of Rabelais, lent inevitableness and pathos and romance to lyric and song. But he was content to better the work of other men. He made hardly anything new.

Stevenson in his essay on Burns remarks his readiness to use up the work of others or take a large hint from it "as if he had some difficulty in commencing." He omits to observe that the very same trait applies to other great artists. There seem to be two orders of creative writers. On the one hand are the innovators, the new men like Blake, Wordsworth, Byron and Shelley, and later Browning. These men owe little to their predecessors; they work on their own devices and construct their medium afresh for themselves. Commonly their fame and acceptance is slow, for they speak in an unfamiliar tongue and they have to educate a generation to understand their work. The other order of artists has to be shown the

[1] W. E. Henley, *Essay on Burns.* Works, David Nutt.

way. They have little fertility in construction or invention. You have to say to them, "Here is something that you could do too; go and do it better"; or "Here is a story to work on, or a refrain of a song; take it and give it your subtlety, your music." The villainy you teach them they will use, and it will go hard with them if they do not better the invention; but they do not invent for themselves. To this order of artists Burns, like Shakespeare, and among the lesser men Tennyson, belongs. In all his plays Shakespeare is known to have invented only one plot; in many he is using not only the structure but in many places the words devised by an older author; his mode of treatment depends on the conventions common in his day, on the tragedy of blood and madness and revenge, on the comedy of intrigue and disguises, on the romance with its strange happenings and its reuniting of long-parted friends. Burns goes the same way to work; scarcely a page of his but shows traces of some original in the Scottish vernacular school. The elegy, the verse epistle, the satirical form of *Holy Willie's Prayer*, the song and recitative of *The Jolly Beggars*, are all to be found in his predecessors, in Fergusson, Ramsay, and the local poets of the south-west of Scotland. In the songs often whole verses, nearly always the refrains, are from older folk poetry. What he did was to pour into these forms the incomparable richness of a personality whose fire and brilliance

and humour transcended all locality and all tradition, a personality which strode like a colossus over the formalism and correctness of his time. His use of familiar forms explains, more than anything else, his immediate fame. His countrymen were ready for him; they could hail him on the instant (just as an Elizabethan audience could hail Shakespeare) as something familiar and at the same time more splendid than anything they knew. He spoke in a tongue they could understand.

It is impossible to judge Burns from his purely English verse; though he did it as well as any of the minor followers of the school of Pope, he did it no better. Only the weakest side of his character —his sentimentalism—finds expression in it; he had not the sense of tradition nor the intimate knowledge necessary to use English to the highest poetic effect; it was indeed a foreign tongue to him. In the vernacular he wrote the language he spoke, a language whose natural force and colour had become enriched by three centuries of literary use, which was capable, too, of effects of humour and realism impossible in any tongue spoken out of reach of the soil. It held within it an unmatched faculty for pathos, a capacity for expressing a lambent and kindly humour, a power of pungency in satire and a descriptive vividness that English could not give. How express in the language of Pope or even of Wordsworth an effect like this?—

"They reel'd, they set, they cross'd, they cleekit,
Till ilka carlin swat and reekit,
And coost her duddies to the wark,
And linket at it in her sark."

or this:—

"Yestreen, when to the trembling string
The dance gaed thro' the lighted ha',
To thee my fancy took its wing—
I sat, but neither heard nor saw:
Tho' this was fair, and that was braw,
And yon the toast of a' the town,
I sigh'd, and said, amang them a',
'Ye are na Mary Morison.'"

It may be objected that in all this there is only one word, and but two or three forms of words, that are not English. But the accent, the rhythm, the air of it are all Scots, and it was a Burns thinking in his native tongue who wrote it, not the Burns of

"Anticipation forward points the view";

or

"Pleasures are like poppies spread,
You grasp the flower, the bloom is shed,"

or any other of the exercises in the school of Thomson and Pope.

It is easy to see that though Burns admired unaffectedly the "Classic" writers, his native realism and his melody made him a potent agent in the cause of naturalism and romance. In his ideas, even more than in his style, he belongs to the oncoming school. The French Revolution, which broke upon Europe when he was at the height of

his career, found him already converted to its principles. As a peasant, particularly a Scotch peasant, he believed passionately in the native worth of man as man and gave ringing expression to it in his verse. In his youth his liberal-mindedness made him a Jacobite out of mere antagonism to the existing régime; the Revolution only discovered for him the more logical republican creed. As the leader of a loose-living, hard-drinking set, such as was to be found in every parish, he was a determined and free-spoken enemy of the kirk, whose tyranny he several times encountered. In his writing he is as vehement an anti-clerical as Shelley, and much more practical. The political side of Romanticism, in fact, which in England had to wait for Byron and Shelley, is already full-grown in his work. He anticipates and gives complete expression to one half of the Romantic movement.

What Burns did for the idea of liberty, Blake did for that and every other idea current among Wordsworth and his successors. There is nothing stranger in the history of English literature than the miracle by which this poet and artist, working in obscurity, utterly unknown to the literary world that existed outside him, summed up in himself all the thoughts and tendencies which were the fruit of anxious discussion and propaganda on the part of the authors—Wordsworth, Coleridge, Lamb—who believed themselves to be the discoverers of fresh truth unknown to their generation. The con-

temporary and independent discovery by Wallace and Darwin of the principle of natural selection furnishes, perhaps, a rough parallel, but the fact serves to show how impalpable and universal is the spread of ideas, how impossible it is to settle literary indebtedness or construct literary genealogy with any hope of accuracy. Blake, by himself, held and expressed quite calmly that condemnation of the "Classic" school that Wordsworth and Coleridge proclaimed against the opposition of a deriding world. As was his habit, he compressed it into a rude epigram:

> "Great things are done when men and mountains meet;
> This is not done by jostling in the street."

The case for nature against urbanity could not be more tersely stated than that. The German metaphysical doctrine, which was the deepest part of the teaching of Wordsworth and Coleridge and their main discovery, he expresses as curtly and off-handedly:

> "The sun's light when he unfolds it,
> Depends on the organ that beholds it."

In the realm of childhood and innocence, which Wordsworth entered fearfully and pathetically as an alien traveller, he moves with the simple and assured ease of one native. He knows the mystical wonder and horror that Coleridge set forth in *The Ancient Mariner*. As for the beliefs of Shelley, they are already fully developed in his poems.

"The king and the priest are types of the oppressor; humanity is crippled by 'mind-forg'd manacles'; love is enslaved to the moral law, which is broken by the Saviour of mankind; and, even more subtly than by Shelley, life is pictured by Blake as a deceit and a disguise veiling from us the beams of the Eternal."[1]

In truth, Blake, despite the imputation of insanity which was his contemporaries' and has later been his commentators' refuge from assenting to his conclusions, is a thinker at once bold and entirely consistent. An absolute unity of belief inspires all his utterances, cryptic and plain. That he never succeeded in founding a school nor gathering followers must be put down in the first place to the form in which his work was issued (it never reached the public of his own day) and to the dark and mysterious mythology in which the prophetic books, which are the full and extended statement of his philosophy, are couched, and in the second place to the inherent difficulty of the philosophy itself. As he himself says, where we read black, he reads white. For the common distinction between good and evil, Blake substitutes the distinction between imagination and reason; and reason, the rationalizing, measuring, comparing faculty by which we come to impute praise or blame, is the only evil in his eyes. "There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it

[1] Prof. Raleigh.

so"; to rid the world of thinking, to substitute for reason, imagination, and for thought, vision, was the object of all that he wrote or drew. The implications of this philosophy carry far, and Blake was not afraid to follow where they led him. Fortunately for those who hesitate to embark on that dark and adventurous journey, his work contains delightful and simpler things. He wrote lyrics of extraordinary freshness and delicacy and spontaneity; he could speak in a child's voice of innocent joys and sorrows and the simple elemental things. His odes to "Spring" and "Autumn" are the harbingers of Keats. Not since Shakespeare and Campion died could English show songs like his

"My silks and fine array,"

and the others which carry the Elizabethan accent. He could write these things as well as the Elizabethans. In others he was unique.

"Tiger! Tiger! burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?"

In all the English lyric there is no voice so clear, so separate or distinctive as his.

CHAPTER VII

THE ROMANTIC REVIVAL

(1)

There are two ways of approaching the periods of change and new birth in literature. The commonest and, for all the study which it entails, the easiest, is that summed up in the phrase, literature begets literature. Following it, you discover and weigh literary influences, the influence of poet on poet, and book on book. You find one man harking back to earlier models in his own tongue, which an intervening age misunderstood or despised; another, turning to the contemporary literatures of neighbouring countries; another, perhaps, to the splendour and exoticism of the East. In the matter of form and style, such a study carries you far. You can trace types of poetry and metres back to curious and unsuspected originals, find the well-known verse of Burns' epistles turning up in Provençal; Tennyson's *In Memoriam* stanza in use by Ben Jonson; the metre of *Christabel* in minor Elizabethan poetry; the peculiar form of FitzGerald's translation of *Omar Khayyam* followed by so many imitators

since, itself to be the actual reflection of the rough metrical scheme of his Persian original. But such a study, though it is profitable and interesting, can never lead to the whole truth. As we saw in the beginning of this book, in the matter of the Renaissance, every age of discovery and re-birth has its double aspect. It is a revolution in style and language, an age of literary experiment and achievement, but its experiments are dictated by the excitement of a new subject-matter, and that subject-matter is so much in the air, so impalpable and universal, that it eludes analysis. Only you can be sure that it is this weltering contagion of new ideas, and new thought—the "Zeitgeist," the spirit of the age, or whatever you may call it—that is the essential and controlling force. Literary loans and imports give the forms into which it can be moulded, but without them it would still exist, and they are only the means by which a spirit which is in life itself, and which expresses itself in action, and in concrete human achievement, gets itself into the written word. The romantic revival numbers Napoleon amongst its leaders as well as Byron, Wellington, Pitt and Wilberforce, as well as Keats and Wordsworth. Only the literary manifestations of the time concern us here, but it is important to remember that the passion for simplification and for a return to nature as a refuge from the artificial complexities of society, which inspired the *Lyrical Ballads*, inspired no

less the course of the Revolution in France, and later, the destruction by Napoleon of the smaller feudal states of Germany, which made possible German nationality and a national spirit.

In this romantic revival, however, the revolution in form and style matters more than in most. The Classicism of the previous age had been so fixed and immutable; it had been enthroned in high places, enjoyed the esteem of society, arrogated to itself the acceptance which good breeding and good manners demanded. Dryden had been a Court poet, careful to change his allegiance with the changing monarchy. Pope had been the equal and intimate of the great people of his day, and his followers, if they did not enjoy the equality, enjoyed at any rate the patronage of many noble lords. The effect of this was to give the prestige of social usage to the verse in which they wrote and the language they used. "There was," said Dr Johnson, "before the time of Dryden no poetical diction, no system of words at once refined from the grossness of domestic use, and free from the harshness of terms appropriated to particular arts. Words too familiar or too remote to defeat the purpose of a poet." This poetic diction, refined from the grossness of domestic use, was the standard poetic speech of the eighteenth century. The heroic couplet in which it was cast was the standard metre. So that the first object of the revolt of the Romantics was the

purely literary object of getting rid of the vice of an unreal and artificial manner of writing. They desired simplicity of style.

When the *Lyrical Ballads* of Wordsworth and Coleridge were published in 1798, the preface which Wordsworth wrote as their manifesto hardly touched at all on the poetic imagination or the attitude of the poet to life and nature. The only question is that of diction. "The majority of the following poems," he writes, "are to be considered as experiments. They were written chiefly with a view to ascertain how far the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society is adapted to the purposes of poetic pleasure." And in the longer preface to the second edition, in which the theories of the new school on the nature and methods of the poetic imagination are set forth at length, he returns to the same point. "The language, too, of these men (that is those in humble and rustic life) has been adopted . . . because such men hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived, and because from their rank in society, and the sameness and narrow circle of their intercourse, being less under the influence of social vanity, they convey their feelings and notions in simple unelaborated expressions." Social vanity—the armour which we wear to conceal our deepest thoughts and feelings — that was what Wordsworth wished to be rid of, and he

chose the language of the common people, not because it fitted, as an earlier school of poets who used the common speech had asserted, the utterance of habitual feeling and common sense, but because it is the most sincere expression of the deepest and rarest passion. His object was the object attained by Shakespeare in some of his supremest moments; the bare intolerable force of the speeches after the murder in *Macbeth*, or of King Lear's

> "Do not laugh at me,
> For as I am a man, I think this lady
> To be my child Cordelia."

Here, then, was one avenue of revolt from the tyranny of artificiality, the getting back of common speech into poetry. But there was another, earlier and more potent in its effect. The eighteenth century, weary of its own good sense and sanity, turned to the Middle Ages for picturesqueness and relief. Romance, of course, had not been dead in all these years, when Pope and Addison made wit and good sense the fashionable temper for writing. There was a strong romantic tradition in the eighteenth century, though it does not give its character to the writing of the time. Dr Johnson was fond of old romances. When he was in Skye he amused himself by thinking of his Scottish tour as the journey of a knight-errant. "These fictions of the Gothic romances," he said, "are not so remote from credibility as is commonly supposed."

It is a mistake to suppose that the passion for mediævalism began with either Coleridge or Scott. Horace Walpole was as enthusiastic as either of them; good eighteenth-century prelates like Hurd and Percy found in what they called the Gothic an inexhaustible source of delight. As was natural, what attracted them in the Middle Ages was not their resemblances to the time they lived in, but the points in which the two differed. None of them had knowledge enough, or insight enough, to conceive or sympathize with the humanity of the thirteenth century, to shudder at its cruelties and hardnesses and persecutions, or to comprehend the spiritual elevation and insight of its rarest minds. "It was art," said William Morris, "art in which all men shared, that made life romantic as people called it in those days. That and not robber barons, and inaccessible kings, with their hierarchy of serving nobles, and other rubbish." Morris belonged to a time which knew its Middle Ages better. To the eighteenth century the robber barons and the "other rubbish" were the essence of romance. For Percy and his followers, mediævalism was a collection of what actors call "properties"—gargoyles, and odds and ends of armour and castle keeps with secret passages, banners and gay colours, and gay shimmering obsolete words. Mistaking what was on its surface at any rate a subtle and complex civilization, for rudeness and quaintness, they seemed to

themselves to pass back into a freer air, where any extravagance was possible, and good breeding and mere circumspection and restraint vanished like the wind.

A similar longing to be rid of the precision and order of everyday life drove them to the mountains, and to the literature of Wales and the Highlands, to Celtic, or pseudo-Celtic romance. To the fashion of the time mountains were still frowning and horrid steeps ; in Gray's *Journal* of his tour in the Lakes, a new understanding and appreciation of nature is only struggling through ; and when mountains became fashionable, it was at first, and remained, in part at least, till the time of Byron, for those very theatrical qualities which had hitherto put them in abhorrence. Wordsworth in his *Lines written above Tintern Abbey*, in which he sets forth the succeeding stages of his mental development, refers to this love of the mountains for their spectacular qualities as the first step in the progress of his mind to poetic maturity :

> "The sounding cataract
> Haunted me like a passion ; the tall rock,
> The mountain and the deep and gloomy wood,
> Their colours and their forms were then to me
> An appetite."

This same passion for the "sounding cataract" and the "tall rock," this appetite for the deep and gloomy wood, gave its vogue in Wordsworth's boyhood to Macpherson's *Ossian*, a book which,

whether it be completely fraudulent or not, was of capital importance in the beginnings of the Romantic movement.

The love of mediæval quaintness and obsolete words, however, led to a more important literary event—the publication of Bishop Percy's edition of the ballads in the Percy folio—the *Reliques of Ancient Poetry*. Percy to his own mind knew the Middle Ages better than they knew themselves, and he took care to dress to advantage the rudeness and plainness of his originals. Perhaps we should not blame him. Sir Walter Scott did the same with better tact and skill in his Border minstrelsy, and how many distinguished editors are there who have tamed and smoothed down the natural wildness and irregularity of Blake? But it is more important to observe that when Percy's reliques came to have their influence on writing his additions were imitated as much as the poems on which he grafted them. Chatterton's *Rowley Poems*, which in many places seem almost inconceivably banal and artificial to us to-day, caught their accent from the episcopal editor as much as from the ballads themselves. None the less, whatever its fault, Percy's collection gave its impetus to one half of the Romantic movement; it was eagerly read in Germany, and when it came to influence Scott and Coleridge it did so not only directly but through Burger's imitation of it; it began the modern study and love of the ballad

which has given us *Sister Helen*, the *White Ship*, and the *Lady of Shalott.*

But the Romantic revival goes deeper than any change, however momentous, of fashion or style. It meant certain fundamental changes in human outlook. In the first place, one notices in the authors of the time an extraordinary development of imaginative sensibility ; the mind at its countless points of contact with the sensuous world and the world of thought seems to become more alive and alert. It is more sensitive to fine impressions, to finely graded shades of difference. Outward objects and philosophical ideas seem to increase in their content and their meaning, and acquire a new power to enrich the intensest life of the human spirit. Mountains and lakes, the dignity of the peasant, the terror of the supernatural, scenes of history, mediæval architecture and armour, and mediæval thought and poetry, the arts and mythology of Greece—all became springs of poetic inspiration and poetic joy. The impressions of all these things were unfamiliar and ministered to a sense of wonder, and by that very fact they were classed as Romantic, as modes of escape from a settled way of life. But they were also in a sense familiar too. The mountains made their appeal to a deep implanted feeling in man, to his native sense of his own worth and dignity and splendour as a part of nature, and his recognition of natural scenery as necessary, and in its fullest meaning as sufficient,

for his spiritual needs. They called him back from the artificiality and complexity of the cities he had built for himself, and the society he had weaved round him, to the natural world in which Providence had planted him of old, and which was full of significance for his soul. The greatest poets of the Romantic revival strove to capture and convey the influence of nature on the mind and of the mind on nature, interpenetrating one another. They were none the less artists because they approached nature in a state of passive receptivity. They believed in the autocracy of the individual imagination none the less because their mission was to divine nature and to understand her, rather than to correct her profusions in the name of art.

In the second place the Romantic revival meant a development of the historical sense. Thinkers like Burke and Montesquieu helped students of politics to acquire perspective; to conceive modern institutions not as things separate, and separately created, but as conditioned by, and evolved from, the institutions of an earlier day. Even the revolutionary spirit of the time looked both before and after, and took history as well as the human perfectibility imagined by philosophers into its purview. In France the reformers appealed in the first instance for a States General—a mediæval institution—as the corrective of their wrongs, and later when they could not, like their neighbours in Belgium, demand reform by way of the restoration

of their historical rights, they were driven to go a step further back still beyond history, to what they conceived to be primitive society, and demand the rights of man. This development of the historical sense, which had such a widespread influence on politics, got itself into literature in the creation of the historical novel. Scott and Chateaubriand revived the old romance in which, by a peculiar ingenuity of form, the adventures of a typical hero of fiction are cast in a historical setting and set about with portraits of real personages. The historical sense affected, too, novels dealing with contemporary life. Scott's best work, his novels of Scottish character, catch more than half their excellence from the richness of colour and proportion which the portraiture of the living people acquires when it is aided by historical knowledge and imagination.

Lastly, besides this awakened historical sense, and this quickening of imaginative sensibility to the message of nature, the Romantic revival brought to literature a revival of the sense of the connection between the visible world and another world which is unseen. The supernatural which in all but the crudest of mechanisms had been out of English literature since *Macbeth*, took hold on the imaginations of authors, and brought with it a new subtlety and a new and nameless horror and fascination. There is nothing in earlier English literature to set beside the strange

and terrible indefiniteness of the *Ancient Mariner*, and though much in this kind has been written since, we have not got far beyond the skill and imagination with which Coleridge and Scott worked on the instinctive fears that lie buried in the human mind.

Of all these aspects of the revival, however, the new sensitiveness and accessibility to the influences of external nature was the most pervasive and the most important. Wordsworth speaks for the love that is in homes where poor men lie, the daily teaching that is in

> "Woods and rills;
> The silence that is in the starry sky,
> The peace that is among the lonely hills."

Shelley for the wildness of the west wind, and the ubiquitous spiritual emotion which speaks equally in the song of a skylark or in a political revolution. Byron for the swing and roar of the sea and the grandeur of savage landscape. Keats for verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways. Scott and Coleridge, though like Byron they are less with nature than with romance, share the same communion.

This imaginative sensibility of the Romantics not only deepened their communion with nature, it brought them into a truer relation with what had before been created in literature and art. The Romantic revival is the Golden Age of English criticism; all the poets were critics of one sort or

another—either formally in essays and prefaces, or in passing and desultory flashes of illumination in their correspondence. Wordsworth, in his prefaces, in his letter to a friend of Burns which contains such a breadth and clarity of wisdom on things that seem alien to his sympathies, even in some of his poems; Coleridge, in his *Biographia Literaria*, in his notes on Shakespeare, in those rhapsodies at Highgate which were the basis for his recorded table talk; Keats in his letters; Shelley in his *Defence of Poetry*; Byron in his satires and journals; Scott in those lives of the novelists which contain so much truth and insight into the works of fellow craftsmen—they are all to be found turning the new acuteness of impression which was in the air they breathed, to the study of literature, as well as to the study of nature. Alongside of them were two authors, Lamb and Hazlitt, whose bent was rather critical than creative, and the best part of whose intelligence and sympathy was spent on the sensitive and loving divination of our earlier literature. With these two men began the criticism of acting and of pictorial art that have developed since into two of the main kinds of modern critical writing.

Romantic criticism, both in its end and its method, differs widely from that of Dr Johnson and his school. Wordsworth and Coleridge were concerned with deep-seated qualities and temperamental differences. Their critical work revolved

round their conception of the fancy and the imagination, the one dealing with nature on the surface and decorating it with imagery, the other penetrating to its deeper significances. Hazlitt and Lamb applied their analogous conception of wit as a lower quality than humour, in the same fashion. Dr Johnson looked on the other hand for correctness of form, for the subordination of the parts to the whole, for the self-restraint and common sense which good manners would demand in society, and for wisdom in practical life. His school cared more for large general outlines than for truth in detail. They would not permit the idiosyncrasy of a personal or individual point of view: hence they were incapable of understanding lyricism, and they preferred those forms of writing which set themselves to express the ideas and feelings that most men may be supposed to have in common. Dr Johnson thought a bombastic and rhetorical passage in Congreve's *Mourning Bride* better than the famous description of Dover cliff in *King Lear*. "The crows, sir," he said of the latter, "impede your fall." Their town breeding, and possibly, as we saw in the case of Dr Johnson, an actual physical disability, made them distrust any clear and sympathetic rendering of the sense impressions which nature creates. One cannot imagine Dr Johnson caring much for the minute observations of Tennyson's nature poems, or delighting in the verdurous and mossy alleys of Keats. His test in

such a case would be simple; he would not have liked to have been in such places, nor, reluctantly compelled to go there, would he in all likelihood have had much to say about them beyond that they were damp. For the poetry—such as Shelley's—which worked by means of impalpable and indefinite suggestion, he would, one may conceive, have cared even less. The famous "This will never do" of Jeffrey's writing on Wordsworth's *Excursion* in the *Edinburgh Review* was the last word of the Johnsonian school. New modes of poetry asked of critics new sympathies and a new way of approach. But it is time to turn to the authors themselves.

(2)

The case of Wordsworth is peculiar. In his own day he was vilified and misunderstood; poets like Byron, whom most of us would now regard simply as depending from the school he created, sneered at him. Shelley and Keats failed to understand him or his motives; he was suspected of apostasy, and when he became poet laureate he was written off as a turncoat who had played false to the ideals of his youth. Now common opinion regards him as a poet above all the others of his age, and amongst all the English poets standing beside Milton, but a step below Shakespeare himself—and we know more about him, more about the processes by which his soul moved from doubts to certainties,

from troubles to triumph, than we do about any other author in our tongue. This knowledge we have from the poem called the *Prelude*, which was published after his death. It was designed to be only the opening and explanatory section of a philosophical poem, which was never completed. Had it been published earlier it would have saved Wordsworth from the coldness and neglect he suffered at the hands of younger men like Shelley; it might even have made their work different from what it is. It has made Wordsworth very clear to us now.

Wordsworth is that rarest thing amongst poets, a complete innovator. He looked at things in a new way. He found his subjects in new places; and he put them into a new poetic form. At the turning point of his life, in his early manhood, he made one great discovery, had one great vision. By the light of that vision and to communicate that discovery he wrote his greatest work. By and by the vision faded, the world fell back into the light of common day, his philosophy passed from discovery to acceptance, and all unknown to him his pen fell into a common way of writing. The faculty of reading which has added fuel to the fire of so many waning inspirations was denied him. He was much too self-centred to lose himself in the works of others. Only the shock of a change of environment—a tour in Scotland, or abroad—shook him into his old thrill of imagination, so that

a few fine things fitfully illumine the enormous and dreary bulk of his later work. If we lost all but the *Lyrical Ballads*, the poems of 1804, and the *Prelude*, and the *Excursion*, Wordsworth's position as a poet would be no lower than it is now, and he would be more readily accepted by those who still find themselves uncertain about him.

The determining factor in his career was the French Revolution—that great movement which, besides remaking France and Europe, made our very modes of thinking anew. While an undergraduate in Cambridge, Wordsworth made several vacation visits to France. The first peaceful phase of the Revolution was at its height; France and the assembly were dominated by the little group of revolutionary orators who took their name from the south-western province from which most of them came, and with this group—the Girondists—Wordsworth threw in his lot. Had he remained he would probably have gone with them to the guillotine. As it was, the commands of his guardian brought him back to England, and he was forced to contemplate from a distance the struggle in which he burned to take an active part. One is accustomed to think of Wordsworth as a mild old man, but such a picture, if it is thrown back as a presentment of the Wordsworth of the 'nineties, is a far way from the truth. This darkly passionate man tortured himself with his longings

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH.

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and his horror. War came, and the prayers for victory in churches found him in his heart praying for defeat; then came the execution of the king; then the plot which slew the Gironde. Before all this Wordsworth trembled as Hamlet did when he learned the ghost's story. His faith in the world was shaken. First his own country had taken up arms against what he believed to be the cause of liberty. Then faction had destroyed his friends whom he believed to be its standard-bearers. What was in the world, in religion, in morality, that such things could be? In the face of this tremendous problem, Wordsworth, unlike Hamlet, was resolute and determined. It was, perhaps, characteristic of him that in his desire to get his feet on firm rock again he fled for a time to the exactest of sciences—to mathematics. But though he got certainties there, they must have been, one judges, certainties too arid for his thirsting mind. Then he made his great discovery—helped to it, perhaps, by his sister Dorothy and his friend Coleridge—he found nature, and in nature, peace.

Not a very wonderful discovery, you will say; but though the cleansing and healing force of natural surroundings on the mind is a familiar enough idea in our own day, that is only because Wordsworth found it. When he gave his message to the world it was a new message. It is worth while remembering that it is still an unaccepted

one. Most of his critics still consider it only Wordsworth's fun when he wrote:

> "One impulse from the vernal wood
> Can teach us more of man,
> Of moral evil and of good,
> Than all the sages can."

Yet Wordsworth really believed that moral lessons and ideas were to be gathered from trees and stones. It was the main part of his teaching. He believed that his own morality had been so furnished him, and he wrote his poetry to convince other people that what had been true for him could be true for them too.

For him life was a series of impressions, and the poet's duty was to recapture those impressions, to isolate them and brood over them, till gradually as a result of his contemplation emotion stirred again —an emotion akin to the authentic thrill that had excited him when the impression was first born in experience. Then poetry is made; this emotion "recollected," as Wordsworth said (we may add, recreated), "in tranquillity," passes into enduring verse. He treasured numberless experiences of this kind in his own life. Some of them are set forth in the *Prelude*—that for instance on which the poem, *The Thorn*, in the *Lyrical Ballads* is based; they were one or other of them the occasion of most of his poems; the best of them produced his finest work—such a poem, for instance, as *Resolution and Independence* or *Gipsies*, where

some chance sight met with in one of the poet's walks is brooded over till it becomes charged with a tremendous significance for him and for all the world. If we ask how he differentiated the experiences which had most value for him, we shall find something deficient. That is to say, things which were unique and precious to him do not always appear so to his readers. He counted as gold much that we regard as dross. But though we may differ from his judgments, the test which he applied to his recollected impressions is clear. He attached most value to those which brought with them the sense of an indwelling spirit, transfusing and interpenetrating all nature, transfiguring with its radiance rocks and fields and trees and the men and women who lived close enough to them to partake of their strength—the sense, as he calls it in his *Lines above Tintern Abbey*, of something "more deeply interfused" by which all nature is made one. Sometimes, as in the hymn to Duty, it is conceived as law. Duty, before whom the flowers laugh, is the daughter of the voice of God, through whom the most ancient heavens are fresh and strong. But in most of his poems its ends do not trouble; it is omnipresent; it penetrates everything and transfigures everything; it is God. It was Wordsworth's belief that the perception of this indwelling spirit weakened as age grew. For a few precious and glorious years he had the vision

"When meadow, grove, and stream,
The earth, and every common sight
To me did seem
Apparelled in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream."

Then as childhood, when "these intimations of immortality," this perception of the infinite, are most strong, passed further and further away, the vision faded and he was left gazing in the light of common day. He had his memories and that was all.

There is, of course, more in the matter than this, and Wordsworth's beliefs were inextricably entangled with the conception which Coleridge borrowed from German philosophy.

"We receive but what we give,"

wrote Coleridge to his friend,

"And in our life alone doth Nature live."

And Wordsworth came to know that the light he had imagined to be bestowed, was a light reflected from his own mind. It is easy to pass from criticism to metaphysics where Coleridge leads, and wise not to follow.

If Wordsworth represents that side of the Romantic revival which is best described as the return to nature, Coleridge has justification for the phrase "Renascence of Wonder." He revived the supernatural as a literary force, emancipated it from the crude mechanism which had been applied

to it by dilettantes like Horace Walpole and Mrs Radcliffe, and invested it instead with that air of suggestion and indefiniteness which gives the highest potency to it in its effect on the imagination. But Coleridge is more noteworthy for what he suggested to others than for what he did in himself. His poetry is, even more than Wordsworth's, unequal; he is capable of large tracts of dreariness and flatness; he seldom finished what he began. The *Ancient Mariner*, indeed, which was the fruit of his close companionship with Wordsworth, is the only completed thing of the highest quality in the whole of his work. *Christabel* is a splendid fragment; for years the first part lay uncompleted, and when the odd accident of an evening's intoxication led him to commence the second, the inspiration had fled. For the second part, by giving to the fairy atmosphere of the first a local habitation and a name, robbed it of its most precious quality; what it gave in exchange was something the public could get better from Scott. *Kubla Khan* went unfinished because the call of a friend broke the thread of the reverie in which it was composed. In the end came opium and oceans of talk at Highgate and fouled the springs of poetry. Coleridge never fulfilled the promise of his early days with Wordsworth. "He never spoke out." But it is on the lines laid down by his share in the pioneer work rather than on the lines of Wordsworth's that the second generation

of Romantic poets—that of Shelley and Keats—developed.

The work of Wordsworth was conditioned by the French Revolution but it hardly embodied the revolutionary spirit. What he conceived to be its excesses revolted him, and though he sought and sang freedom, he found it rather in the later revolt of the nationalities against the Revolution as manifested in Napoleon himself. The spirit of the Revolution, as it was understood in France and in Europe, had to wait for Shelley for its complete expression. Freedom is the breath of his work—freedom not only from the tyranny of earthly powers, but from the tyranny of religion, expressing itself in republicanism, in atheism, and in complete emancipation from the current moral code both in conduct and in writing. The reaction which had followed the overthrow of Napoleon at Waterloo sent a wave of absolutism and repression all over Europe. Italy returned under the heel of Austria; the Bourbons were restored in France; in England came the days of Castlereagh and Peterloo. The poetry of Shelley is the expression of what the children of the Revolution—men and women who were brought up in and believed the revolutionary gospel—thought about these things.

But it is more than that. Of no poet in English, nor perhaps in any other tongue, could it be said with more surety that the pursuit of the spirit of beauty dominates all his work. For Shelley it

interfused all nature, and to possess it was the goal of all endeavour. The visible world and the world of thought mingle themselves inextricably in his contemplation of it. For him there is no boundary-line between the two, the one is as real and actual as the other. In his hands that old trick of the poets, the simile, takes on a new and surprising form. He does not enforce the creations of his imagination by the analogy of natural appearances; his instinct is just the opposite—to describe and illumine nature by a reference to the creatures of thought. Other poets, Keats for instance, or Tennyson, or the older poets like Dante and Homer, might compare ghosts flying from an enchanter to leaves flying before the wind. They might describe a poet wrapped up in his dreams as being like a bird singing invisible in the brightness of the sky. But Shelley can write of the west wind as

> "Before whose unseen presence the leaves, dead,
> Are driven like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing,"

and he can describe a skylark in the heavens as

> "Like a poet hidden
> In the light of thought."

Of all English poets he is the most completely lyrical. Nothing that he wrote but is wrought out of the anguish or joy of his own heart.

> "Most wretched souls,"

he writes

> "Are cradled into poetry by wrong,
> They learn in suffering what they teach in song."

Perhaps his work is too impalpable and moves in an air too rarefied. It sometimes lacks strength. It fails to take grip enough of life. Had he lived he might have given it these things; there are signs in his last poems that he would have given it. But he could hardly have bettered the sheer and triumphant lyricism of *The Skylark*, of some of his choruses, and of the *Ode in Dejection*, and of the *Lines written on the Eugenæan Hills.*

If the Romantic sense of the one-ness of nature found its highest exponent in Shelley, the Romantic sensibility to outward impressions reached its climax in Keats. For him life is a series of sensations, felt with almost febrile acuteness. Records of sight and touch and smell crowd every line of his work; the scenery of a garden in Hampstead becomes like a landscape in the tropics, so extraordinary vivid and detailed is his apprehension and enjoyment of what it has to give him. The luxuriance of his sensations is matched by the luxuriance of his powers of expression. Adjectives, heavily charged with messages for the senses, crowd every line of his work, and in his earlier poems overlay so heavily the thought they are meant to convey that all sense of sequence and structure is apt to be smothered under their weight. Not that consecutive thought claims a place in his conception of his poetry. His ideal was passive contemplation rather than active mental exertion. "O for a life of sensations rather than of thoughts," he exclaims

PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY.

From a painting by A. Curran in the National Portrait Gallery.

in one of his letters; and in another, "It is more noble to sit like Jove than to fly like Mercury." His work has one message and one only, the lastingness of beauty and its supreme truth. It is stated in *Endymion* in lines that are worn bare with quotation. It is stated again, at the height of his work, in his greatest ode:

> "Beauty is truth, truth beauty: that is all
> We know on earth and all we need to know."

His work has its defects; he died at twenty-six, so it would be a miracle if it were not so. He lacks taste and measure; he offends by an over-luxuriousness and sensuousness; he fails when he is concerned with flesh and blood; he is apt, as Mr Robert Bridges has said, "to class women with roses and sweetmeats." But in his short life he attained with surprising rapidity and completeness to poetic maturity, and perhaps from no other poet could we find things to match his greatest—*Hyperion*, *Isabella*, the *Eve of St Agnes*, and the *Odes*.

There remains a poet over whom opinion is more sharply divided than it is about any other writer in English. In his day Lord Byron was the idol, not only of his countrymen, but of Europe. Of all the poets of the time he was, if we except Scott, whose vogue he eclipsed, the only one whose work was universally known and popular. Everybody read him; he was admired not only by the multitude and by his equals, but by at least one who

was his superior, the German poet Goethe, who did not hesitate to say of him that he was the greatest talent of the century. Though this exalted opinion still persists on the Continent, hardly anyone could be found in England to subscribe to it now. Without insularity, we may claim to be better judges of authors in our own tongue than foreign critics, however distinguished and comprehending. How then shall be explained Lord Byron's instant popularity and the position he won? What were the qualities which gave him the power he enjoyed?

In the first place, he appealed by virtue of his subject-matter—the desultory wanderings of *Childe Harold* traversed ground every mile of which was memorable to men who had watched the struggle which had been going on in Europe with scarcely a pause for twenty years. Descriptive journalism was then and for nearly half a century afterwards unknown, and the poem by its descriptiveness, by its appeal to the curiosity of its readers, made the same kind of success that vividly written special correspondence would to-day, the charm of metre superadded. Lord Byron gave his readers something more, too, than mere description. He added to it the charm of a personality, and when that personality was enforced by a title, when it proclaimed its sorrows as the age's sorrows, endowed itself with an air of symbolism and set itself up as a kind of scapegoat for the nation's sins, its triumph

was complete. Most men have from time to time to resist the temptation to pose to themselves; many do not even resist it. For all those who chose to believe themselves blighted by pessimism, and for all the others who would have loved to believe it, Byron and his poetry came as an echo of themselves. Shallow called to shallow. Men found in him, as their sons found more reputably in Tennyson, a picture of what they conceived to be the state of their own minds.

But he was not altogether a man of pretence. He really and passionately loved freedom; no one can question his sincerity in that. He could be a fine and scathing satirist; and though he was careless, he had great poetic gifts.

(3)

The age of the Romantic revival was one of poetry rather than of prose; it was in poetry that the best minds of the time found their means of expression. But it produced prose of rare quality too, and there is delightful reading in the works of its essayists and occasional writers. In its form the periodical essay had changed little since it was first made popular by Addison and Steele. It remained, primarily, a vehicle for the expression of a personality, and it continued to seek the interests of its readers by creating or suggesting an individuality strong enough to carry off any desultory adventure by the mere force of its own attractiveness. Yet

there is all the difference in the world between Hazlitt and Addison, or Lamb and Steele. The *Tatler* and the *Spectator* leave you with a sense of artifice; Hazlitt and Lamb leave you with a grip of a real personality—in the one case very vigorous and combative, in the other set about with a rare plaintiveness and gentleness, but in both absolutely sincere. Addison is gay and witty and delightful, but he only plays at being human; Lamb's essays —the translation into print of a heap of idiosyncrasies and oddities, and likes and dislikes, and strange humours—come straight and lovably from a human soul.

The prose writers of the Romantic movement brought back two things into writing which had been out of it since the seventeenth century. They brought back egotism and they brought back enthusiasm. They had the confidence that their own tastes and experiences were enough to interest their readers; they mastered the gift of putting themselves on paper. But there is one wide difference between them and their predecessors. Robert Burton was an egotist but he was an unconscious one; the same is perhaps true, though much less certainly, of Sir Thomas Browne. In Lamb and Hazlitt and De Quincey egotism was deliberate, consciously assumed, the result of a compelling and shaping art. If one reads Lamb's earlier essays and prose pieces, one can see the process at work—watch him consciously imitating Fuller, or Burton,

or Browne, mirroring their idiosyncrasies, making their quaintnesses and graces his own. By the time he came to write the *Essays of Elia*, he had mastered the personal style so completely that his essays seem simply the overflow of talk. They are so desultory; they move from one subject to another so waywardly—such an essay as a *Chapter on Ears*, for instance, passing with the easy inconsequence of conversation from anatomy through organ music to beer; when they quote, as they do constantly, it is incorrectly, as in the random reminiscences of talk. Here one would say is the cream risen to the surface of a full mind and skimmed at one taking. How far all this is from the truth we know—know, too, how for months he polished and rewrote these magazine articles, rubbing away roughnesses and corners, taking off the traces of logical sequences and argument, till in the finished work of art he mimicked inconsequence so perfectly that his friends might have been deceived. And the personality he put on paper was partly an artistic creation, too. In life Lamb was a nervous, easily excitable and emotional man; his years were worn with the memory of a great tragedy and the constantly impending fear of a repetition of it. One must assume him in his way to have been a good man of business—he was a clerk in the India House, then a throbbing centre of trade, and the largest commercial concern in England, and when he retired his employers gave him a very handsome

pension. In the early portrait by Hazlitt there is a dark and gleaming look of fire and decision. But you would never guess it from his books. There he is the gentle recluse, dreaming over old books, old furniture, old prints, old plays and playbills; living always in the past, loving in the town secluded byways like the Temple, or the libraries of Oxford Colleges, and in the country quiet and shaded lanes, none of the age's enthusiasm for mountains in his soul. When he turned critic it was not to discern and praise the power and beauty in the works of his contemporaries, but to rediscover and interpret the Elizabethan and Jacobean romantic plays.

This quality of egotism Lamb shares with other writers of the time, with De Quincey, for instance, who left buried in work which is extensive and unequal much that lives by virtue of the singular elaborateness and loftiness of the style which he could on occasion command. For the revival of enthusiasm one must turn to Hazlitt, who brought his passionate and combative disposition to the service of criticism, and produced a series of studies remarkable for their earnestness and their vigour, and for the essential justness which they display despite the prejudice on which each of them was confessedly based.

CHARLES LAMB.

From a painting by Henry Meyer in the British Museum.

CHAPTER VIII

THE VICTORIAN AGE

(1)

Had it not been that with two exceptions all the poets of the Romantic revival died early, it might be more difficult to draw a line between their school and that of their successors than it is. As it happened, the only poet who survived and wrote was Wordsworth, the oldest of them all. For long before his death he did nothing that had one touch of the fire and beauty of his earlier work. The respect he began, after a lifetime of neglect, to receive in the years immediately before his death, was paid not to the conservative laureate of 1848, but to the revolutionary in art and politics of fifty years before. He had lived on, long after his work was done,

> "To hear the world applaud the hollow ghost
> That blamed the living man."

All the others, Keats, Shelley, Byron, were dead before 1830, and the problem which might have confronted us had they lived, of adult work running counter to the tendencies and ideals of youth, does

not exist for us. Keats or Shelley might have lived as long as Carlyle, with whom they were almost exactly contemporary; had they done so, the age of the Romantic revival and the Victorian age would have been united in the lives of authors who were working in both. We should conceive, that is, the whole period as one, just as we conceive of the Renaissance in England, from Surrey to Shirley, as one. As it is, we have accustomed ourselves to a strongly marked line of division. A man must be on either one side or the other; Wordsworth, though he wrote on till 1850, is on the further side; Carlyle, though he was born in the same year as Keats, on the hither side. Still the accident of length of days must not blind us to the fact that the Victorian period, though in many respects its ideals and modes of thinking differed from those of the period which preceded it, is essentially an extension of the Romantic revival and not a fresh start. The coherent inspiration of Romanticism disintegrated into separate lines of development, just as in the seventeenth century the single inspiration of the Renaissance broke into different schools. Along these separate lines represented by such men as Browning, the Pre-Raphaelites, Arnold, and Meredith, literature enriched and elaborated itself into fresh forms. None the less, every author in each of these lines of literary activity invites his readers to understand his direct relations to the Romantic movement.

Rossetti touches it through his original, Keats; Arnold through Goethe and Byron; Browning first through Shelley and then in item after item of his varied subject-matter.

In one direction the Victorian age achieved a salient and momentous advance. The Romantic revival had been interested in nature, in the past, and in a lesser degree in art, but it had not been interested in men and women. To Wordsworth the dalesmen of the Lakes were part of the scenery they moved in; he saw men as trees walking, and when he writes about them as in such great poems as *Resolution and Independence*, the *Brothers*, or *Michael*, it is as natural objects he treats them, invested with the lonely remoteness that separates them from the complexities and passions of life as it is lived. They are there, you feel, to teach the same lesson as the landscape teaches in which they are set. The passing of the old Cumberland beggar through villages and past farmsteads brings to those who see him the same kind of consolation as the impulses from a vernal wood that Wordsworth celebrated in his purely nature poetry. Compare with Wordsworth, Browning, and note the fundamental change in the attitude of the poet that his work reveals. *Pippa Passes* is a poem on exactly the same scheme as the *Old Cumberland Beggar*, but in treatment no two things could be further apart. The intervention of Pippa is dramatic, and though her song is in

the same key as the wordless message of Wordsworth's beggar she is a world apart from him, because she is something not out of natural history, but out of life. The Victorian age extended the imaginative sensibility which its predecessor had brought to bear on nature and history, to the complexities of human life. It searched for individuality in character, studied it with a loving minuteness, and built up out of its discoveries amongst men and women a body of literature which in its very mode of conception was more closely related to life, and thus the object of greater interest and excitement to its readers, than anything which had been written in the previous ages. It is the direct result of this extension of Romanticism that the novel became the characteristic means of literary expression of the time, and that Browning, the poet who more than all others represents the essential spirit of his age, should have been, as it were, a novelist in verse. Only one other literary form, indeed, could have ministered adequately to this awakened interest, but by some luck not easy to understand the drama, which might have done with greater economy and directness the work the novel had to do, remained outside the main stream of literary activity. To the drama at last it would seem that we are returning, and it may be that in the future the direct representation of the clash of human life, which is still mainly in the

hands of our novelists, may come back to its own domain.

The Victorian age, then, added humanity to nature and art as the subject-matter of literature. But it went further than that. For the first time since the Renaissance came an era which was conscious of itself as an epoch in the history of mankind, and confident of its mission. The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries revolutionized cosmography, and altered the face of the physical world. The nineteenth century, by the discoveries of its men of science, and by the remarkable and rapid succession of inventions which revolutionized the outward face of life, made hardly less alteration in accepted ways of thinking. The evolutionary theory, which had been in the air since Goethe, and to which Darwin was able to give an apparently incontrovertible basis of scientific fact, profoundly influenced man's attitude to nature and to religion. Physical as apart from natural science made scarcely less advance, and instead of a world created at some fixed moment of time, on which had been placed by some outward agency all the forms and shapes of nature that we know, came the conception of a planet congealing out of a nebula, and of some lower, simpler, and primeval form of life multiplying and diversifying itself through succeeding stages of development to form both the animal and the vegetable world. This conception not only enormously excited and stimulated thought,

but it gave thinkers a strange sense of confidence and certainty not possessed by the age before. Everything seemed plain to them; they were heirs of all the ages. Their doubts were as certain as their faith.

> "There lives more faith in honest doubt,
> Believe me, than in half the creeds."

said Tennyson; "honest doubt," hugged with all the certainty of a revelation, is the creed of most of his philosophical poetry, and, what is more to the point, was the creed of the masses that were beginning to think for themselves, to whose awakening interest his work so strongly appealed. There were, no doubt, literary side-currents. Disraeli survived to show that there were still young men who thought Byronically. Rossetti and his school held themselves proudly aloof from the rationalistic and scientific tendencies of the time, and found in the Middle Ages, better understood than they had been either by Coleridge or Scott, a refuge from a time of factories and fact. The Oxford movement ministered to the same tendencies in religion and philosophy; but it is the scientific spirit, and all that the scientific spirit implied, its certain doubt, its care for minuteness and truth of observation, its growing interest in social processes, and the conditions under which life is lived, that is the central fact in Victorian literature.

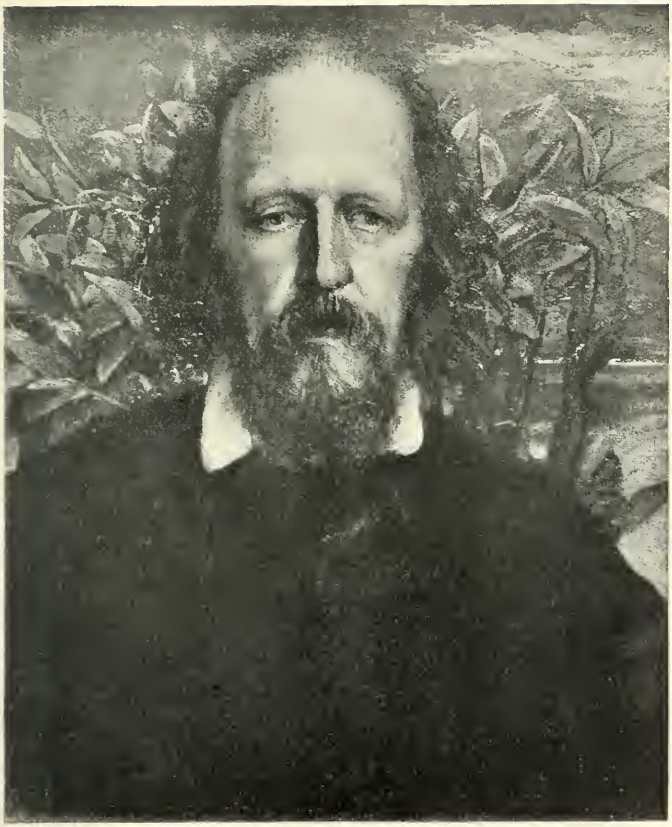
Tennyson represents more fully than any other poet this essential spirit of the age. If it be true,

as has been often asserted, that the spirit of an age is to be found best in the work of lesser men, his complete identity with the thought of his time is in itself evidence of his inferiority to his contemporary, Browning. Comparisons between the two men seem inevitable; they were made by readers when *In Memoriam* and *Men and Women* came hot from the press, and they have been made ever since.[1] There could, of course, scarcely be two men more dissimilar; Tennyson elaborating and decorating what is at bottom something simple and plain—using what has been called the "ornate" style and founding what is in a way a new poetic diction which has lasted to our own day; Browning delving into the esoteric and the obscure, and bringing up strange and unfamiliar finds; Tennyson in faultless verse registering current newly accepted ways of thought; Browning in advance thinking afresh for himself, occupied ceaselessly in the arduous labour of creating an audience fit to judge him. The age justified the accuracy with which Tennyson mirrored it, by accepting him and rejecting Browning. It is this very accuracy that almost forces us at this time to minimize and perhaps dispraise Tennyson's work. We have passed from Victorian certainties, and so he is apt, when he

[1] See, for instance, Bagehot's remarkable and ingenious essay on "Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Browning, or the Pure, Ornate, and Grotesque Styles in Poetry," for which *Enoch Arden* and *Dramatis Personæ* were the text. No writer of criticism better repays the close attention of students of literature than Bagehot.

writes in the mood of *Locksley Hall* and the rest, to appear to us a little shallow, a little empty, and a little pretentious.

His earlier poetry, before he took upon himself the burden of the age, is his best work, and it bears strongly marked upon it the influence of Keats. Such a poem, for instance, as *Œnone* shows an extraordinarily fine sense of language and melody, and the capacity caught from Keats of conveying a rich and highly coloured pictorial effect. No other poet, save Keats, has had a sense of colour so highly developed as Tennyson's. From his boyhood he was an exceedingly close and sympathetic observer of the outward forms of nature, and he makes a splendid use of what his eyes had taught him in these earlier poems. Later his interest in insects and birds and flowers outran the legitimate opportunity he possessed of using it in poetry. It was his habit, his son tells us, to keep notebooks of things he had observed in his garden or in his walks, and to work them up afterwards into similes for the *Princess* and the *Idylls of the King*. Read in the books written by admirers, in which they have been studied and collected (there are several of them), these similes are pleasing enough; in the text where they stand they are apt to have the air of impertinences, beautiful and extravagant impertinences no doubt, but alien to their setting. In one of the *Idylls of the King* the fall of a drunken knight from his horse is compared to the



ALFRED LORD TENNYSON.

From a painting by G. F. Watts, R.A.

fall of a jutting edge of cliff and with it a lance-like fir-tree, which Tennyson had observed near his home, and one cannot resist the feeling that the comparison is a thought too great for the thing it was meant to illustrate. So, too, in the *Princess* when he describes a handwriting,

> "In such a hand as when a field of corn
> Bows all its ears before the roaring East,"

he is using up a sight noted in his walks and transmuted into poetry on a trivial and frivolous occasion. You do not feel, in fact, that the handwriting visualized spontaneously called up the comparison; you are as good as certain that the simile existed waiting for use before the handwriting was thought of.

The accuracy of his observation of nature, his love of birds and larvæ, is matched by the carefulness with which he embodied, as soon as ever they were made, the discoveries of natural and physical science. Nowadays, possibly because these things have become commonplace to us, we may find him a little school-boy-like in his pride of knowledge. He knows that

> "This world was once a fluid haze of light,
> Till toward the centre set the starry tides
> And eddying wild suns that wheeling cast
> The planets,"

just as he knows what the catkins on the willows are like, or the names of the butterflies: but he is capable, on occasion, of "dragging it in," as in

> "The nebulous star we call the sun,
> If that hypothesis of theirs be sound,"

from the mere pride in his familiarity with the last new thing. His dealings with science, that is, no more than his dealings with nature, have that inevitableness, that spontaneous appropriateness that we feel we have a right to ask from great poetry.

Had Edgar Allan Poe wanted an example for his theory of the impossibility of writing, in modern times, a long poem, he might have found it in Tennyson. His strength is in his shorter pieces; even where as in *In Memoriam* he has conceived and written something at once extended and beautiful, the beauty lies rather in the separate parts; the thing is more in the nature of a sonnet sequence than a continuous poem. Of his other larger works, the *Princess*, a scarcely happy blend between burlesque in the manner of the *Rape of the Lock*, and a serious apostleship of the liberation of women, is redeemed by the lyrics which it contains. Tennyson's innate conservatism hardly squared with the liberalizing tendencies he caught from the more advanced thought of his age, in writing it. Something of the same kind is true of *Maud*, which is a novel told in dramatically varied verse. The hero is morbid, his social satire peevish, and a story which could have been completely redeemed by the ending (the death of the hero) which artistic fitness demands, is of value

for us now through its three amazing songs, in which the lyric genius of Tennyson reached its finest flower. It cannot be denied, either, that he failed—though magnificently—in the *Idylls of the King*. The odds were heavily against him in the choice of a subject. Arthur is at once too legendary and too shadowy for an epic hero, and nothing but the treatment that Milton gave to Satan (*i.e.* flat substitution of the legendary person by a newly created character) could fit him for the place. Even if Arthur had been more promising than he is, Tennyson's sympathies were fundamentally alien from the moral and religious atmosphere of Arthurian romance. His robust Protestantism left no room for mysticism; he could neither appreciate nor render the mystical fervour and exaltation which is in the old history of the Holy Grail. Nor could he comprehend the morality of a society where courage, sympathy for the oppressed, loyalty and courtesy were the only essential virtues, and love took the way of freedom and the heart rather than the way of law. In his heart Tennyson's attitude to the ideals of chivalry and the old stories in which they are embodied differed probably very little from that of Roger Ascham, or of any other Protestant Englishman; when he endeavoured to make an epic of them and to fasten to it an allegory in which Arthur should typify the war of soul against sense, what happened was only what might have been expected. The heroic

enterprise failed, and left us with a series of mid-Victorian novels in verse in which the knights figure as heroes of the common mid-Victorian type.

But if he failed in his larger poems, he had a genius little short of perfect in his handling of shorter forms. The Arthurian story which produced only middling moralizing in the *Idylls*, gave us as well the supremely written Homeric episode of the *Morte d'Arthur*, and the sharp and defined beauty of *Sir Galahad* and the *Lady of Shallott*. Tennyson had a touch of the pre-Raphaelite faculty of minute painting in words, and the writing of these poems is as clear and naïve as in the best things of Rossetti. He had also what neither Rossetti nor any of his contemporaries in verse, except Browning, had, a fine gift of understanding humanity. The peasants of his English idylls are conceived with as much breadth of sympathy and richness of humour, as purely and as surely, as the peasants of Chaucer or Burns. A note of passionate humanity is indeed in all his work. It makes vivid and intense his scholarly handling of Greek myth; always the unchanging human aspect of it attracts him most, in Œnone's grief, in the indomitableness of Ulysses, in the weariness and disillusionment in Tithonus. It has been the cause of the comfort he has brought to sorrow; none of his generation takes such a human attitude to death. Shelley could yearn for the infinite,

Browning treat it as the last and greatest adventure, Arnold meet it clear-eyed and resigned. To Wordsworth it is the mere return of man the transient to Nature the eternal.

> "No motion has she now; no force,
> She neither hears nor sees,
> Rolled round in earth's diurnal course
> With rocks, and stones, and trees."

To Tennyson it brings the fundamental human home-sickness for familiar things.

> "Ah, sad and strange as in dark summer dawns
> The earliest pipe of half-awakened birds
> To dying ears, when unto dying eyes
> The casement slowly grows a glimmering square."

It is an accent which wakes an echo in a thousand hearts.

(2)

While Tennyson, in his own special way and, so to speak, in collaboration with the spirit of the age, was carrying on the work of Romanticism on its normal lines, Browning was finding a new style and a new subject-matter. In his youth he had begun as an imitator of Shelley, and *Pauline* and *Paracelsus* remain to show what the influence of the "sun-treader" was on his poetry. But as early as his second publication, *Bells and Pomegranates*, he had begun to speak for himself, and with *Men and Women*, a series of poems of amazing variety and brilliance, he placed himself unassailably in the first rank. Like Tennyson's, his genius continued

high and undimmed while life was left him. *Men and Women* was followed by an extraordinary narrative poem, *The Ring and the Book*, and it by several volumes of scarcely less brilliance, the last of which appeared on the very day of his death.

Of the two classes into which, as we saw when we were studying Burns, creative artists can be divided, Browning belongs to that one which makes everything new for itself, and has in consequence to educate the readers by whom its work can alone be judged. He was an innovator in nearly everything he did; he thought for himself; he wrote for himself, and in his own way. And because he refused to follow ordinary modes of writing, he was and is still widely credited with being tortured and obscure.[1] The charge of obscurity is unfortunate because it tends to shut off from him a large class of readers for whom he has a sane and special and splendid message.

His most important innovation in form was his device of the dramatic lyric. What interested him

[1] The deeper causes of Browning's obscurity have been detailed in Chapter IV. of this book. It may be added for the benefit of the reader who fights shy on the report of it, that in nine cases out of ten it arises simply from his colloquial method; we go to him expecting the smoothness and completeness of Tennyson; we find in him the irregularities, the suppressions, the quick changes of talk—the clipped, clever talk of much-idea'd people who hurry breathlessly from one aspect to another of a subject—an obscurity similar to that of Shakespeare in his later plays, particularly *The Tempest* and the *Winter's Tale*.

in life was men and women, and in them, not their actions, but the motives which governed their actions. To lay bare fully the working of motive in a narrative form with himself as narrator was obviously impossible; the strict dramatic form, though he attained some success in it, does not seem to have attracted him, probably because in it the ultimate stress must be on the thing done rather than the thing thought; there remained, therefore, of the ancient forms of poetry, the lyric. The lyric had of course been used before to express emotions imagined and not real to the poet himself; the Elizabethans and their successors, Donne and his school, in the seventeenth century had so used it; Browning was the first to project it to express imagined emotions of men and women, whether typical or individual, whom he himself had created. Alongside this perversion of the lyric, he created a looser and freer form, the dramatic monologue, in which most of his most famous poems, *Cleon*, *Sludge the Medium*, *Bishop Blougram's Apology*, etc., are cast. In the convention which Browning established, all kinds of people are endowed with a miraculous articulation, a new gift of tongues; they explain themselves, their motives, the springs of those motives (for in Browning's view every thought and act of a man's life is part of an interdependent whole), and their author's peculiar and robust philosophy of life. Out of the dramatic monologues he devised the scheme of *The Ring*

and the Book, a narrative poem in which the episodes, and not the plot, are the basis of the structure, and the story of a trifling and sordid crime is set forth as it appeared to the minds of the chief actors in succession.[1] To these new forms he added the originality of an extraordinary realism in style. Few poets have the power by a word, a phrase, a flash of observation in detail to make you see the event as Browning makes you see it.

Many books have been written on the philosophy of Browning's poetry. Stated briefly, its message is that of an optimism which depends on a recognition of the strenuousness of life. The base of his creed, as of Carlyle's, is the gospel of labour; he believes in the supreme moral worth of effort. Life is a "training school" for a future existence, and our place in it depends on the courage and strenuousness with which we have laboured here. Evil is in the world only as an instrument in the process of development; by conquering it we exercise our spiritual faculties the more. Only torpor is the supreme sin, even as in *The Statue and the Bust*, where effort would have been to a criminal end.

[1] This way of telling a story, which is implicit in the method of Richardson, who used the epistolary form to make his readers see a situation separately from the respective points of view of all the persons concerned in it, has been revived in a new form in our own day by Mr Arnold Bennett, whose novels *Clayhanger* and *Hilda Lessway* make a new departure in English fiction.

"The counter our lovers staked was lost
As surely as if it were lawful coin:
And the sin I impute to each frustrate ghost
Was, the unlit lamp and the ungirt loin,
Though the end in sight was a crime, I say."

All the other main ideas of his poetry fit with perfect consistency on to his scheme. Love, the manifestation of a man's or a woman's nature in the highest and most intimate relationship possible, is an opportunity—the highest opportunity—for spiritual growth. It can reach this end though an actual and earthly union is impossible.

"She has lost me, I have gained her;
Her soul's mine and thus grown perfect,
I shall pass my life's remainder.
Life will just hold out the proving
Both our powers, alone and blended:
And then come the next life quickly!
This world's use will have been ended."

It follows that the reward of effort is the promise of immortality, and that for each man, just because his thoughts and motives taken together count, and not one alone, there is infinite hope.

The contemporaries of Tennyson and Browning in poetry divide themselves into three separate schools. Nearest to them in temper is the school of Matthew Arnold and Clough; they have the same quick sensitiveness to the intellectual tendencies of the age, but their foothold in a time of shifting and dissolving creeds is a stoical resignation very different from the buoyant optimism of Browning,

or Tennyson's mixture of science and doubt and faith. Very remote from them, on the other hand, is the backward-gazing mediævalism of Rossetti and his circle, who revived (Rossetti from Italian sources, Morris from Norman) a Middle Age which neither Scott nor Coleridge had more than partially and brokenly understood. The last school, that to which Swinburne and Meredith with all their differences unite in belonging, gave up Christianity with scarcely so much as a regret—

"We have said to the dream that caress'd and the dread that smote us,
Good-night and good-bye"—

and turned with a new hope and exultation to the worship of our immemorial mother the earth. In both of them, the note of enthusiasm for political liberty which had been lost in Wordsworth after 1815, and was too early extinguished with Shelley, was revived by the Italian Revolution in splendour and fire.

(3)

As one gets nearer one's own time, a certain change comes insensibly over one's literary studies. Literature comes more and more to mean imaginative literature or writing about imaginative literature. The mass of writing comes to be taken not as literature, but as argument or information; we consider it purely from the point of view of its subject-matter. A comparison will make this at once clear. When a man reads Bacon, he com-

ALGERNON CHARLES SWINBURNE.

From a painting by G. F. Watts, R.A.

monly regards himself as engaged in the study of English literature; when he reads Darwin, he is occupied in the study of natural science. A reader of Bacon's time would have looked on him as we look on Darwin now.

The distinction is obviously illogical, but a writer on English literature within brief limits is forced to bow to it if he wishes his book to avoid the dreariness of a summary, and he can plead in extenuation the increased literary output of the later age, and the incompleteness with which time so far has done its work in sifting the memorable from the forgettable, the ephemeral from what is going to last. The main body of imaginative prose literature—the novel—is treated of in the next chapter, and here no attempt will be made to deal with any but the admittedly greatest names of those whose object in writing was a literary object. Nothing can be said, for instance, of the writings, admirable in their literary qualities of purity and terseness, of Darwin or Huxley; or of the polemics of Newman (whose literary qualities have been perhaps overrated); or of Kingsley or Maurice. These authors, one and all, interpose no barrier, so to speak, between their subject-matter and their readers; you are not when you read them conscious of a literary intention, but of some utilitarian one; and as an essay on English literature is by no means a handbook to serious reading, they will be no more mentioned here.

But in the case of more than one nineteenth-century writer in prose, this method of exclusion cannot apply. Carlyle and Ruskin, Macaulay and Matthew Arnold were all professional men of letters; each in the voluminous compass of his works touched on a large variety of subjects; all wrote highly individual and peculiar styles; and all, without being exactly professional philosophers or professional preachers, were, as every good man of letters, whether he denies it or not, is and must be, lay moralists and prophets. Of the two first Ruskin is plain and easily read, and he derives his message; Carlyle, his original, is apt to be tortured and obscure, and probably some guidance to him may be of service to those who embark on his works.

As we saw, he was the oldest of the Victorians; he was over forty when the Queen came to the throne. Already his years of preparation in Scotland, town and country, were over, and he had settled in that famous little house in Chelsea which for nearly half a century to come was to be one of the central hearths of literary London. More than that, he had already fully formed his mode of thought and his peculiar style. *Sartor Resartus* was written and published serially before the Queen came to the throne; the *French Revolution* came in the year of her accession at the very time that Carlyle's lectures were making him a fashionable sensation; most of his miscellaneous essays had

already appeared in the reviews. But with the strict Victorian era, as if to justify the usually arbitrary division of literary history by dynastic periods, there came a new spirit into his work. For the first time he applied his peculiar system of ideas to contemporary politics. *Chartism* appeared in 1839; *Past and Present*, which does the same thing as *Chartism* in an artistic form, three years later. They were followed by one other book—*Latter-Day Pamphlets*—addressed particularly to contemporary conditions, and by two remarkable and voluminous historical works. Then came the death of his wife, and for the last fifteen years of his life silence, broken only briefly and at rare intervals.

The reader who comes to Carlyle with preconceived notions based on what he has heard of the subject-matter of his books is certain to be surprised by what he finds. There are histories in the canon of his works and pamphlets on contemporary problems, but they are composed on a plan that no other historian and no other social reformer would own. A reader will find in them no argument, next to no reasoning, and little practical judgment. Carlyle was not a great "thinker" in the strictest sense of that term. He was under the control, not of his reason, but of his emotions; deep feeling, a volcanic intensity of temperament flaming into the light and heat of prophecy, invective, derision, or a simple splendour of eloquence,

is the characteristic of his work. Against cold-blooded argument his passionate nature rose in fierce rebellion; he had no patience with the formalist or the doctrinaire. Nor had he the faculty of analysis; his historical works are a series of pictures, splendidly and vividly conceived, and with enormous colour and a fine illusion of reality, but one-sided as regards the truth. In his essays on hero-worship he contents himself with a noisy reiteration of the general predicate of heroism; there is very little except their names and the titles to differentiate one sort of hero from another. His picture of contemporary conditions is not so much a reasoned indictment as a wild and fantastic orgy of epithets: "dark simmering pit of Tophet," "bottomless universal hypocrisies," and all the rest. In it all he left no practical scheme. His works are fundamentally not about politics or history or literature, but about himself. They are the exposition of a splendid egotism, fiercely enthusiastic about one or two deeply held convictions; their strength does not lie in their matter of fact.

This is, perhaps, a condemnation of him in the minds of those people who ask of a social reformer an actuarially accurate scheme for the abolition of poverty, or from a prophet a correct forecast of the result of the next general election. Carlyle has little help for these and no message save the disconcerting one of their own futility. His message

is at once larger and simpler, for though his form was prose, his soul was a poet's soul, and what he has to say is a poet's word. In a way, it is partly Wordsworth's own. The chief end of life, his message is, is the performance of duty, chiefly the duty of work. "Do thy little stroke of work; this is Nature's voice, and the sum of all the commandments, to each man." All true work is religion, all true work is worship; to labour is to pray. And after work, obedience the best discipline, so he says in *Past and Present*, for governing, and "our universal duty and destiny; wherein whoso will not bend must break." Carlyle asked of every man action and obedience and to bow to duty; he also required of him sincerity and veracity, the duty of being a real and not a sham, a strenuous warfare against cant. The historical facts with which he had to deal he grouped under these embracing categories, and in the *French Revolution*, which is as much a treasure-house of his philosophy as a history, there is hardly a page on which they do not appear. "Quack-ridden," he says, "in that one word lies all misery whatsoever."

These bare elemental precepts he clothes in a garment of amazing and bizarre richness. There is nothing else in English faintly resembling the astonishing eccentricity and individuality of his style. Gifted with an extraordinarily excitable and vivid imagination; seeing things with sudden

and tremendous vividness, as in a searchlight or a lightning flash, he contrived to convey to his readers his impressions full charged with the original emotion that produced them, and thus with the highest poetic effect. There is nothing in all descriptive writing to match the vividness of some of the scenes in the *French Revolution* or in the narrative part of *Cromwell's Letters and Speeches*, or, more than perhaps in any of his books, because in it he was setting down deep-seated impressions of his boyhood rather than those got from brooding over documents, in *Sartor Resartus*. Alongside this unmatched pictorial vividness and a quite amazing richness and rhythm of language, more surprising and original than anything out of Shakespeare, there are of course striking defects —a wearisome reiteration of emphasis, a clumsiness of construction, a saddening fondness for solecisms and hybrid inventions of his own. The reader who is interested in these (and everyone who reads him is forced to become so) will find them faithfully dealt with in John Sterling's remarkable letter (quoted in Carlyle's *Life of Sterling*) on *Sartor Resartus*. But gross as they are, and frequently as they provide matter for serious offence, these eccentricities of language link themselves up in a strange indissoluble way with Carlyle's individuality and his power as an artist. They are not to be imitated, but he would be much less than he is without them, and they act by their

very strength and pungency as a preservative of his work. That of all the political pamphlets which the new era of reform occasioned, his, which were the least in sympathy with it and are the furthest off the main stream of our political thinking now, alone continue to be read, must be laid down not only to the prophetic fervour and fire of their inspiration but to the dark and violent magic of their style.

CHAPTER IX

THE NOVEL

(1)

THE faculty for telling stories is the oldest artistic faculty in the world, and the deepest implanted in the heart of man. Before the rudest cave-pictures were scratched on the stone, the story-teller, it is not unreasonable to suppose, was plying his trade. All early poetry is simply story-telling in verse. Stories are the first literary interest of the awakening mind of a child. As that is so, it is strange that the novel, which of all literary ways of story-telling seems closest to the unstudied tale-spinning of talk, should be the late discovery that it is. Of all the main forms into which the literary impulse moulds the stuff of imagination, the novel is the last to be devised. The drama dates from prehistoric times, so does the epic, the ballad and the lyric. The novel as we know it dates, practically speaking, from 1740. What is the reason it is so late in appearing?

The answer is, partly at any rate, that there seems no room for good drama and good fiction at the same time in literature; drama and novels do

THOMAS CARLYLE.

From the portrait by James M'Neill Whistler.

not easily exist side by side, and the novel had to wait for the decadence of the drama before it could appear and triumph. If one were to make a table of succession for the various kinds of literature as they have been used naturally and spontaneously (not academically), the order would be the epic, the drama, the novel; and it would be obvious at once that the order stood for something more than chronological succession, and that literature in its function as a representation and criticism of life passed from form to form in the search of greater freedom, greater subtlety, and greater power. At present we seem to be at the climax of the third stage in this development; there are signs that the fourth is on the way, and that it will be a return to drama—not to the old, formal, ordered kind, but something new and freer, ready to gather up and interpret what there is of newness and freedom in the spirit of man and the society in which he lives and to suit its methods to the new material which comes to its hand.

The novel, then, had to wait for the drama's decline, but there was literary story-telling long before that. There were mediæval romances in prose and verse; Renaissance pastoral tales, and stories of adventure; collections, plenty of them, of short stories modelled on Boccaccio, like those in Painter's *Palace of Pleasure*. But none of these, not even romances which deal in moral and sententious advice like *Euphues*, approach the essence of the novel as

we know it. They are all (except *Euphues*, which is simply a framework of travel for a book of aphorisms) simple and objective; they set forth incidents or series of incidents; long or short, they are anecdotes only—they take little account of character. It was impossible we should have the novel as distinct from the tale, till stories acquired a subjective interest for us; till we began to think about character and to look at actions not only outwardly, but within at their springs.

As has been stated earlier in this book, it was in the seventeenth century that this interest in character was first wakened. Shakespeare had brought to the drama, which before him was concerned with actions viewed outwardly, a psychological interest; he had taught that "character is destiny," and that men's actions and fates spring not from outward agencies, but from within in their own souls. The age began to take a deep and curious interest in men's lives; biography was written for the first time and autobiography; it is the great period of memoir-writing both in England and France; authors like Robert Burton came, whose delight was to dig down into human nature in search for oddities and individualities of disposition; humanity as the great subject of enquiry for all men came to its own. All this has a direct bearing on the birth of the novel. One transient form of literature in the seventeenth century—the Character—is an ancestor in the direct line. The

collections of them—Earle's *Microcosmography* is the best—are not very exciting reading, and they never perhaps quite succeeded in naturalizing a form borrowed from the later age of Greece, but their importance in the history of the novel to come is clear. Take them and add them to the story of adventure—*i.e.* introduce each fresh person in your plot with a description in the character form, and the step you have made towards the novel is a long one; you have given to plot which was already there the added interest of character.

That, however, was not quite how the thing worked in actual fact. At the heels of the "Character" came the periodical essay of Addison and Steele. Their interest in contemporary types was of the same quality as Earle's or Hall's, but they went a different way to work. Where these compressed and cultivated a style which was staccato and epigrammatic, huddling all the traits of their subject in short sharp sentences that follow each other with all the brevity and curtness of items in a prescription, Addison and Steele observed a more artistic plan. They made, as it were, the prescription up, adding one ingredient after another slowly as the mixture dissolved. You are introduced to Sir Roger de Coverley, and to a number of other typical people, and then, in a series of essays which if they were disengaged from their setting would be to all intents a novel and a fine one, you are made aware one by one of different

traits in the squire's character and those of his friends, each trait generally enshrined in an incident which illustrates it; you get to know them, that is, gradually, as you would in real life, and not all in a breath, in a series of compressed statements, as is the way of the character writers. With the Coverley essays in the *Spectator*, the novel in one of its forms—that in which an invisible and all-knowing narrator tells a story in which someone else whose character he lays bare for us is the hero —is as good as achieved.

Another manner of fiction—the autobiographical —had already been invented. It grew directly out of the public interest in autobiography, and particularly in the tales of their voyages which the discoverers wrote and published on their return from their adventures. Its establishment in literature was the work of two authors, Bunyan and Defoe. The books of Bunyan, whether they are told in the first person or no, are and were meant to be autobiographical; their interest is a subjective interest. Here is a man who endeavours to interest you, not in the character of some other person he has imagined or observed, but in himself. His treatment of it is characteristic of the awakening talent for fiction of his time. *The Pilgrim's Progress* is begun as an allegory, and so continues for a little space till the story takes hold of the author. When it does, whether he knew it or not, allegory goes to the winds. But the autobiographical form of fiction

in its highest art is the creation of Defoe. He told stories of adventure, incidents modelled on real life, as many tellers of tales had done before him, but to the form as he found it he added a psychological interest—the interest of the character of the narrator. He contrived to observe in his writing a scrupulous and realistic fidelity and appropriateness to the conditions in which the story was to be told. We learn about Crusoe's island, for instance, gradually just as Crusoe learns of it himself, though the author is careful, by taking his narrator up to a high point of vantage the day after his arrival, that we shall learn the essentials of it, so long as verisimilitude is not sacrificed, as soon as possible. It is the paradox of the English novel that these our earliest efforts in fiction were meant, unlike the romances which preceded them, to pass for truth. Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year* was widely taken as literal fact, and it is still quoted as such occasionally by rash though reputable historians. So that in England the novel began with realism, as it has culminated, and across two centuries Defoe and the "naturalists" meet each other. Defoe, it is proper also in this place to notice, fixed the peculiar form of the historical novel. In his *Memoirs of a Cavalier*, the narrative of an imaginary person's adventures in a historical setting is interspersed with the entrance of actual historical personages, exactly the method of historical romancing which was brought to perfection by Sir Walter Scott.

(2)

In the eighteenth century came the decline of the drama for which the novel had been waiting. By 1660 the romantic drama of Elizabeth's time was dead; the comedy of the Restoration which followed, witty and brilliant though it was, reflected a society too licentious and artificial to secure it permanence; by the time of Addison play-writing had fallen to journey-work, and the theatre to openly expressed contempt. When Richardson and Fielding published their novels there was nothing to compete with fiction in the popular taste. And besides, a new class of readers had arrived for whom some new kind of literature was needed. The growth of business and prosperity had increased the number of persons of leisure. Town society and social life as we know it to-day dates from precisely this period, and society must needs have something, humanly interesting and not too exacting, to read. Addison and Steele ministered to this new taste, but in too brief a manner to satisfy it; it needed something more. It would seem as though the novel had been waiting for this favourable circumstance. In a sudden burst of prolific inventiveness, which can be paralleled in all letters only by the period of Marlowe and Shakespeare, masterpiece after masterpiece poured from the press. Within two generations, besides Richardson and Fielding came

Sterne and Goldsmith and Smollett and Fanny Burney in naturalism, and Horace Walpole and Mrs Radcliffe in the new way of romance. Novels by minor authors were published in thousands as well. The novel, in fact, besides being the occasion of literature of the highest class, attracted by its lucrativeness that undercurrent of journey-work authorship which had hitherto busied itself in poetry or plays. Fiction has been its chief occupation ever since.

Anything like a detailed criticism or even a bare narrative of this voluminous literature is plainly impossible within the limits of a single chapter. Readers must go for it to books on the subject. It is possible here merely to draw attention to those authors to whom the English novel as a more or less fixed form is indebted for its peculiar characteristics. Foremost among these are Richardson and Fielding; after them there is Walter Scott. After him, in the nineteenth century, Dickens and Meredith and Mr Hardy; last of all the French realists and the new school of romance. To one or other of these originals all the great authors in the long list of English novelists owe their method and their choice of subject-matter.

With Defoe fiction gained verisimilitude, it ceased to deal with the incredible; it aimed at exhibiting, though in strange and memorable circumstances, the workings of the ordinary mind. It is Richardson's main claim to fame that he

contrived a form of novel which exhibited an ordinary mind working in normal circumstances, and that he did this with a minuteness which till then had never been thought of and has not since been surpassed. His talent is very exactly a microscopical talent; under it the common stuff of life, separated from its surroundings and magnified beyond previous knowledge, yields strange and new and deeply interesting sights. He carried into the study of character, which had begun in Addison with an eye to externals and eccentricities, a minute faculty of inspection which watched and recorded unconscious mental and emotional processes.

To do this he employed a method which was, in effect, a compromise between that of the autobiography and that of the tale told by an invisible narrator. The weakness of the autobiography is that it can write only of events within the knowledge of the supposed speaker, and that consequently the presentation of all but one of the characters of the book is an external presentation. We know, that is, of Man Friday only what Crusoe could, according to realistic appropriateness, tell us about him. We do not know what he thought or felt within himself. On the other hand, the method of invisible narration had not at this time acquired the faculty which it possesses now of doing Friday's thinking aloud or exposing fully the workings of his mind. So that Richardson, whose

interests were psychological, whose strength and talent lay in the presentation of the states of mind appropriate to situations of passion or intrigue, had to look about him for a new form, and that form he found in the novel of letters. In a way, if the end of a novel be the presentation not of action, but of the springs of action; if the external event is in it always of less importance than the emotions which conditioned it, and the emotions which it set working, the novel of letters is the supreme manner for fiction. Consider the possibilities of it. There is a series of events in which A, B, and C are concerned. Not only can the outward events be narrated as they appeared to all three separately by means of letters from each to another, or to a fourth party, but the motives of each, and the emotions which each experiences as a result of the actions of the others or them all, can be laid bare. No other method can wind itself so completely into the psychological intricacies and recesses which lie behind every event. It is a mistake to suppose that Richardson adopted it haphazard or merely because he was a "model letter-writer" in his youth. He had a consciously worked-out theory and a deliberate artistic purpose. A mere chronicle of events, he says himself in *Sir Charles Grandison*, would be shorter, but would it be equally interesting? Yet the form, as everybody knows, has not been popular; even an expert novel-reader could hardly name offhand more

than two or three examples of it since Richardson's day. Why is this? Well, chiefly it is because the mass of novelists have not had Richardson's knowledge of, or interest in, the psychological under-side of life, and those who have, as, amongst the moderns, Henry James, have devised out of the convention of the invisible narrator a method by which they can with greater economy attain in practice fairly good results. For the mere narration of action in which the study of character plays a subsidiary part, it was, of course, from the beginning impossible. Scott turned aside at the height of his power to try it in *Redgauntlet*; he never made a second attempt.

For Richardson's purpose, it answered admirably, and he used it with supreme effect. Particularly he excelled in that side of the novelist's craft which has ever since (whether because he started it or not) proved the subtlest and most attractive, the presentation of women. Richardson was one of those men who are not at their ease in other men's society, and whom other men, to put it plainly, are apt to regard as coxcombs and fools. But he had a genius for the friendship and confidence of women. In his youth he wrote love-letters for them. His first novel grew out of a plan to exhibit in a series of letters the quality of feminine virtue, and in its essence (though with a ludicrous and so to speak "kitchen-maidish" misunderstanding of his own sex) adheres to the plan. His

second novel, *Sir Charles Grandison*, which designs to set up a model man against the monster of iniquity in *Pamela*, is successful only so far as it exhibits the thoughts and feelings of the heroine whom Grandison ultimately marries. His last, *Clarissa Harlowe*, is a masterpiece of sympathetic divination into the feminine mind. *Clarissa* is, as has been well said, the "Eve of fiction, the prototype of the modern heroine"; feminine psychology, as good as unknown before (Shakespeare's women being the "Fridays" of a highly intelligent Crusoe), has hardly been brought further since. But *Clarissa* is more than mere psychology; whether she represents a contemporary tendency or whether Richardson made her so, she starts a new epoch. "This," says Henley, "is perhaps her finest virtue as it is certainly her greatest charm: that until she set the example, woman in literature as a self-suffering individuality, as an existence endowed with equal rights to independence—of choice, volition, action—with man had not begun to be." She had not begun to be it in life either.

What Richardson did for the subtlest part of a novelist's business, his dealings with psychology, Fielding did for the most necessary part of it, the telling of the story. Before him hardly any story had been told well; even if it had been plain and clear as in Bunyan and Defoe it had lacked the emphasis, the light and shade, of skilful grouping. On the "picaresque" (so the autobiographical form

was called abroad) convention of a journey he grafted a structure based in its outline on the form of the ancient epic. It proved extraordinarily suitable for his purpose. Not only did it make it easy for him to lighten his narrative with excursions in a heightened style, burlesquing his origins, but it gave him at once the right attitude to his material. He told his story as one who knew everything; could tell conversations and incidents as he conceived them happening, with no violation of credibility, nor any strain on his reader's imagination; and without any impropriety could interpose in his own person, recalling things to the reader which might have escaped his attention, pointing at parallels he might have missed, laying bare the irony or humour beneath a situation. He allowed himself digressions and episodes, told separate tales in the middle of the action, introduced, as in Partridge's visit to the theatre, the added piquancy of topical allusion; in fact he did anything he chose. And he laid down that free form of the novel which is characteristically English, and from which, in its essence, no one till the modern Realists has made a serious departure.

In the matter of his novels, he excels by reason of a Shakespearean sense of character and by the richness and rightness of his faculty of humour. He had a quick eye for contemporary types, and an amazing power of building out of them men and women whose individuality is full and rounded.

You do not feel, as you do with Richardson, that his fabric is spun silk-worm-wise out of himself; on the contrary, you know it to be the fruit of a gentle and observant nature, and of a stock of fundamental human sympathy. His gallery of portraits, Joseph Andrews, Parson Adams, Parson Trulliber, Jones, Blifil, Partridge, Sophia and her father, and all the rest, are each of them minute studies of separate people; they live and move according to their proper natures; they are conceived not from without but from within. Both Richardson and Fielding were conscious of a moral intention; but where Richardson is sentimental, vulgar, and moral only so far as it is moral (as in *Pamela*) to inculcate selling at the highest price or (as in *Grandison*) to avoid temptations which never come in your way, Fielding's morality is fresh and healthy, and (though not quite free from the sentimentality of scoundrelism) at bottom sane and true. His knowledge of the world kept him right. His acquaintance with life is wide, and his insight is keen and deep. His taste is almost as catholic as Shakespeare's own, and the life he knew, and which other men knew, he handles for the first time with the freedom and imagination of an artist.

Each of the two—Fielding and Richardson—had his host of followers. Abroad Richardson won immediate recognition; in France Diderot went so far as to compare him with Homer and Moses! He gave the first impulse to modern

French fiction. At home, less happily, he set going the sentimental school, and it was only when that had passed away that—in the delicate and subtle character-study of Miss Austen — his influence came to its own.

To begin with, the imitators or rivals of Fielding had it all their own way in England. The most charming of them was perhaps Goldsmith, whose single essay in novel-writing, *The Vicar of Wakefield*, went straight to the hearts of his readers the moment it was published and has been a classic ever since. Of the others, Sterne won the greater reputation, but Smollett gave and continues to give the most entertainment. With a fine stock of experience to draw upon—for he had been at sea in the rough-and-tumble life of the eighteenth-century navy,—Smollett turned his hand to the novel of adventure of a type freer and more full of incident than Fielding's, which had been founded in France by Lesage. He took, however, nothing but his plan from this French original, and the scene in which his novels are laid, as well as his characters and their and his prejudices, are entirely British. "His novels," said Thackeray, "are recollections of his own adventures, his characters drawn, as I should think, from personages with whom he had become acquainted in his own career of life." No part of that career yielded him better material than his time at sea, and the sea scenes in *Roderick Random* are the best things of their kind

HENRY FIELDING.

From the portrait by Hogarth in the British Museum.

in English writing. They gave the impulse to Captain Marryat, and, what with that and the closeness with which Dickens in some of his novels followed Smollett's plan of writing, he may be credited with having as deep an influence on the future as Fielding himself. He was coarser than Fielding, not morally but in the eighteenth-century way of brutality, and he had less art. But his novels cover a wider range of experience, their humours are broader, they give a greater impression of fecundity of invention than anything else of their time.

No other writings exemplify so well the complete freedom of construction which is the characteristic of the English novel than those of Laurence Sterne. His greatest book, *Tristram Shandy*, purports to be a record of the life and opinions of its hero. In fact, there is very little about his life and nothing about his opinions. A large part of the book is taken up with the troublesome business of getting him born: the rest of it mainly with the eccentricities of his father, a humorist and philosopher of a type which seems to be very characteristic of its time, and was looked upon by other countries as peculiarly English; with his mother, his Uncle Toby, who has really made the book immortal, and that uncle's servant, Corporal Trim. Round about these figures, with no sustained narrative or plot, and with indeed every stress, down to the typographical, laid upon the desultoriness of the

novel, Sterne weaves the curious irregular and intermittent web of his imagination, helping himself, without acknowledgment, to large borrowings from older authors as he goes. At its best, when he is purely pathetic, or when his humour plays upon the subject without becoming sniggering or vulgar, Sterne is a fine writer. At his worst, when his pathos passes, as it constantly does, into the singular aberration of taste called sensibility, he is unendurable. But it is worth remembering that the things in him which we dislike were what gave him his reputation with his contemporaries both in England and France. To have acquired a reputation by bad work, and to retain it by virtue of qualities less well esteemed when the work was done, is not a bad basis for permanency in literary fame.

Miss Austen, as we have seen, belongs rather to the school of Richardson than to that of Fielding, and though her work belongs to a later date, it is convenient to treat her here. Her work represents the domestic novel in its purest form. Like Richardson, she drew her subjects from ordinary people, and her desire was to give a truthful and minute picture of ordinary life and emotions; but unlike Richardson, whose temperament inclined him to write about a people a grade above him in the social scale, Miss Austen held resolutely to the actual society in which she moved. She was convinced that a really veracious picture of ordinary life could be as interesting as any romance. The

people and incidents that she works upon seem, or must have seemed to the readers of her day, to promise little that was interesting, and, as we know from some modern writing of the kind, in hands less skilful they would not be very attractive. It is the triumph of her genius that she can make a tea-party in Bath or at a country rectory as interesting, and in the literary sense of the word exciting, to the reader as is a description of an adventurous night at an inn by Fielding, or of a battlefield by Sir Walter Scott. On the other hand, though she excels by her quiet observation and record of detail, she does not, like the realists later, bore us with detail for detail's sake. All that she writes helps to develop the dramatic truth and effect with which her characters are displayed, and, without using the means of self-expression with which Richardson endowed his, she contrives to give to her people a not less vivid impression of reality. If we miss great emotions, that is simply because in the society which she set herself to depict great emotions very seldom intrude. Perhaps her temperament with its subtle quality of irony and detachment would not have allowed her to admit their existence.

The main road of the English novel—the road from Fielding to Dickens and Meredith—was widened two ways by Sir Walter Scott. The historical novel, which had been before his day either an essay in anachronism with nothing histori-

cal in it but the date, or a laborious and uninspired compilation of antiquarian research, took form and life under his hands. His wide reading, stored as it was in a marvellously retentive memory, gave him all the background he needed to achieve a historical setting, and allowed him to concentrate his attention on the actual telling of his story; to which his genial and sympathetic humanity and his quick eye for character gave a humorous depth and richness that was all his own. It is not surprising that he made the historical novel a literary vogue all over Europe. In the second place, he began in his novels of Scottish character a sympathetic study of nationality. He is not, perhaps, a fair guide to contemporary conditions; his interests were too romantic and too much in the past to catch the rattle of the looms that caught the ear of Galt, and if we want a picture of the great fact of modern Scotland, its industrialization, it is to Galt we must go. But in his comprehension of the essential character of the people he has no rival; in it his historical sense seconded his observation, and the two mingling gave us the pictures whose depth of colour and truth make his Scottish novels, *Old Mortality*, *The Antiquary*, *Redgauntlet*, the greatest things of their kind in literature.

(3)

The peculiarly national style of fiction founded by Fielding and carried on by his followers reached

its culminating point in *Vanity Fair*. In it the reader does not seem to be simply present at the unfolding of a plot the end of which is constantly present to the mind of the author and to which he is always consciously working, every incident having a bearing on the course of the action; rather he feels himself to be the spectator of a piece of life which is too large and complex to be under the control of a creator, which moves to its close not under the impulsion of a directing hand, but independently impelled by causes evolved in the course of its happening. With this added complexity goes a more frequent interposition of the author in his own person—one of the conventions, as we have seen, of this national style. Thackeray is present to his readers, indeed, not as the manager who pulls the strings and sets the puppets in motion, but as an interpreter who directs the reader's attention to the events on which he lays stress, and makes them a starting-point for his own moralizing. This persistent moralizing—sham cynical, real sentimental—this thumping of death-bed pillows, as in the dreadful case of Miss Crawley, makes Thackeray's use of the personal interposition almost less effective than that of any other novelist. Already while he was doing it, Dickens had conquered the public; and the English novel was making its second fresh start.

He is an innovator in more ways than one. In the first place, he is the earliest novelist to practise

a conscious artistry of plot. *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* remains mysterious, but those who essay to conjecture the end of that unfinished story have at least the surety that its end, full worked out in all its details, had been in its author's mind before he set pen to paper. His imagination was as diligent and as disciplined as his pen. Dickens's practice in this matter could not be better put than in his own words, when he describes himself as "in the first stage of a new book, which consists in going round and round the idea, as you see a bird in its cage go about and about his sugar before he touches it." That his plots are always highly elaborated is the fruit of this preliminary disciplined exercise of thought. The method is familiar to many novelists now; Dickens was the first to put it into practice. In the second place, he made a new departure by his frankly admitted didacticism and by the skill with which in all but two or three of his books—*Bleak House*, perhaps, and *Little Dorrit*—he squared his purpose with his art. Lastly, he made the discovery which has made him immortal. In him for the first time the English novel produced an author who dug down into the masses of the people for his subjects; apprehended them in all their inexhaustible character and humour and pathos, and reproduced them with a lively and loving artistic skill.

Dickens has, of course, serious faults. In particular, readers emancipated by lapse of time from

the enslavement of the first enthusiasm have quarrelled with the mawkishness and sentimentality of his pathos, and with the exaggeration of his studies of character. It has been said of him, as it has of Thackeray, that he could not draw a "good woman," and that Agnes Copperfield, like Amelia Sedley, is a very doll-like type of person. To critics of this kind it may be retorted that though "good" and "bad" are categories relevant to melodrama, they apply very ill to serious fiction, and that indeed to the characters of any of the novelists—the Brontës, Mrs Gaskell, or the like—who lay bare character with fullness and intimacy, they could not well be applied at all. The faultiness of them in Dickens is less than in Thackeray, for in Dickens they are only incident to the scheme, which lies in the hero (his heroes are excellent) and in the grotesque characters, whereas in his rival they are in the theme itself. For his pathos, not even his warmest admirer could perhaps offer a satisfactory case. The charge of exaggeration, however, is another matter. To the person who complains that he has never met Dick Swiveller or Micawber or Mrs Gamp the answer is simply Turner's to the sceptical critic of his sunset, "Don't you wish you could?" To the other, who objects more plausibly to Dickens's habit of attaching to each of his characters some label which is either so much flaunted all through that you cannot see the character at all, or else mysteriously and unaccount-

ably disappears when the story begins to grip the author, Dickens has himself offered an amusing and convincing defence. In the preface to *Pickwick* he answers those who criticized the novel on the ground that Pickwick began by being purely ludicrous and developed into a serious and sympathetic individuality, by pointing to the analogous process which commonly takes place in actual human relationships. You begin a new acquaintanceship with perhaps not very charitable prepossessions; these, later, a deeper and better knowledge removes, and where you have before seen an idiosyncrasy you come to love a character. It is ingenious, and it helps to explain Mrs Nickleby, the Pecksniff daughters, and many another. Whether it is true or not (and it does not explain the poorness of such pictures as Carker and his kind), there can be no doubt that this trick in Dickens of beginning with a salient impression and working outward to a fuller conception of character is part at least of the reason of his enormous hold upon his readers. No man leads you into the mazes of his invention so easily and with such a persuasive hand.

The great novelists who were writing contemporarily with him—the Brontës, Mrs Gaskell, George Eliot—it is impossible to deal with here, except to say that the last seems, because of her occasional inability to fuse completely art and ethics, inferior to Mrs Gaskell or to either of the

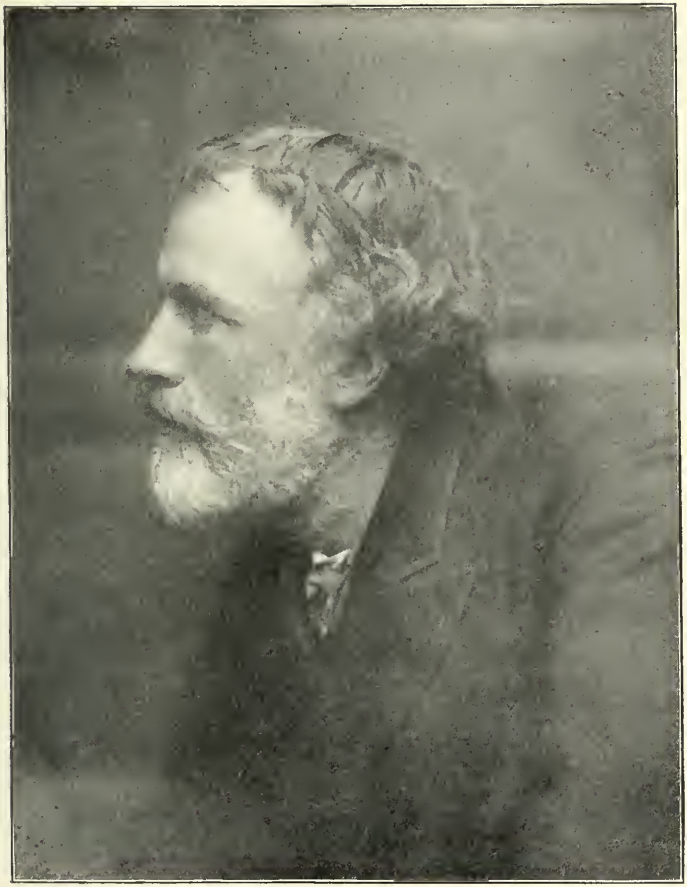
Brontë sisters. Nor of the later Victorians who added fresh variety to the national style can the greatest, Meredith, be more than mentioned for the exquisiteness of his comic spirit and the brave gallery of English men and women he has given us in what is, perhaps, fundamentally the most English thing in fiction since Fielding wrote. For our purpose Mr Hardy, though he is a less brilliant artist, is more to the point. His novels brought into England the contemporary pessimism of Schopenhauer and the Russians, and found a home for it among the English peasantry. Convinced that in the upper classes character could be studied and portrayed only subjectively because of the artificiality of a society which prevented its outlet in action, he turned to the peasantry, because with them conduct is the direct expression of the inner life. Character could be shown working, therefore, not subjectively but in the act, if you chose a peasant subject. His philosophy, expressed in this medium, is sombre. In his novels you can trace a gradual realization of the defects of natural laws and the quandary men are put to by their operation. Chance, an irritating and trifling series of coincidences, plays the part of fate. Nature seems to enter with the hopelessness of man's mood. Finally, the novelist turns against life itself. "Birth," he says, speaking of Tess, "seemed to her an ordeal of degrading personal compulsion whose gratuitousness nothing in the result seemed

to justify and at best could only palliate." It is strange to find pessimism in a romantic setting; strange, too, to find a paganism which is so little capable of light or joy.

(4)

The characteristic form of English fiction—that in which the requisite illusion of the complexity and variety of life is rendered by discursiveness, by an author's licence to digress, to double back on himself, to start, maybe, in the middle of a story and work subsequently to the beginning and the end; in short, by his power to do whatever is most expressive of his individuality—found a rival in the last twenty years of the nineteenth century in the French Naturalistic or Realist school, in which the illusion of life is got by a studied and sober veracity of statement, and by the minute accumulation of detail. To the French Naturalists a novel approached in importance the work of a man of science, and they believed it ought to be based on documentary evidence, as a scientific work would be. Above all, it ought not to allow itself to be coloured by the least gloss of imagination or idealism; it ought never to shrink from a confrontation of the naked fact. On the contrary, it was its business to carry it to the dissecting table and there minutely examine everything that lay beneath its surface.

The school first became an English possession



GEORGE MEREDITH.

From the portrait by Frank Hollyer.

in the early translations of the work of Zola; its methods were transplanted into English fiction by Mr George Moore. From his novels, both in passages of direct statement and in the light of his practice, it is possible to gather together the materials of a manifesto of the English Naturalistic school. The Naturalists complained that English fiction lacked construction in the strictest sense; they found in the English novel a remarkable absence of organic wholeness; it did not fulfil their first and broadest canon of subject-matter —by which a novel has to deal, in the first place, with a single and rhythmical series of events; it was too discursive. They made this charge against English fiction; they also retorted the charge brought by native writers and their readers against the French of foulness, sordidness, and pessimism in their view of life. "We do not," says a novelist in one of Mr Moore's books, "we do not always choose what you call unpleasant subjects, but we do try to get to the roots of things; and the basis of life being material and not spiritual, the analyst sooner or later finds himself invariably handling what this sentimental age calls coarse." "The novel," says the same character, "if it be anything, is contemporary history, an exact and complete reproduction of the social surroundings of the age we live in." That succinctly is the Naturalistic theory of the novel as a work of science—that as the history of a nation lies hidden often in social wrongs and in domestic

grief as much as in the movements of parties or dynasties, the novelist must do for the former what the historian does for the latter. It is his business in the scheme of knowledge of his time.

But the Naturalists believed quite as profoundly in the novel as a work of art. They claimed for their careful pictures of the grey and sad and sordid an artistic worth, varying in proportion to the intensity of the emotion in which the picture was composed and according to the picture's truth, but in its essence just as real and permanent as the artistic worth of romance. "Seen from afar," writes Mr Moore, "all things in nature are of equal worth; and the meanest things, when viewed with the eyes of God, are raised to heights of tragic awe which conventionality would limit to the deaths of kings and patriots." On such a lofty theory they built their treatment and their style. It is a mistake to suppose that the Realist school deliberately cultivates the sordid or shocking. Examine in this connection Mr Moore's *Mummer's Wife*, one of our great English Realist novels, and, for the matter of that, one of the fine things in English fiction, and you will see that the scrupulous fidelity of the author's method, though it denies him those concessions to a sentimentalist or romantic view of life which are the common implements of fiction, denies him no less the extremities of horror or loathsomeness. The heroine sinks into the miserable squalor of a dipsomaniac and dies from a

drunkard's disease, but her end is shown as the ineluctable consequence of her life—its early greyness and monotony, the sudden shock of a new and strange environment, and the resultant weakness of will which a morbid excitability inevitably brought about. The novel, that is to say, deals with a "rhythmical series of events and follows them to their conclusion"; it gets at the roots of things; it tells us of something which we know to be true in life whether we care to read it in fiction or not. There is nothing in it of sordidness for sordidness' sake, nor have the Realists any philosophy of an unhappy ending. In this case the ending is unhappy because the sequence of events admitted of no other solution; in others the ending is happy or merely neutral as the preceding story decides. If what one may call neutral endings predominate, it is because they also—notoriously—predominate in life. But the question of unhappiness or its opposite has nothing whatever to do with the larger matter of beauty; it is the triumph of the Realists that at their best they discovered a new beauty in things, the loveliness that lies in obscure places, the splendour of sordidness, humility, and pain. They have taught us that beauty, like the Spirit, blows where it lists, and we know from them that the antithesis between realism and idealism is only on their lower levels; at their summits they unite and are one. No true Realist but is an idealist too.

Most of what is best in English fiction since has been directly occasioned by their work; Gissing and Mr Arnold Bennett may be mentioned as two authors who are fundamentally Realist in their conception of the art of the novel, and the Realist ideal partakes in a greater or less degree in the work of nearly all our eminent novelists to-day. But realism is not and cannot be interesting to the great public; it portrays people as they are, not as they would like to be, and where they are, not where they would like to be. It gives no background for day-dreaming. Now, literature (to repeat what has been more than once stated earlier in this book) is a way of escape from life as well as an echo or mirror of it, and the novel, as the form of literature which more than any other men read for pleasure, is the main avenue for this escape. So that alongside this invasion of Realism it is not strange that there grew a revival in romance.

The main agent of it, Robert Louis Stevenson, had the romantic strain in him intensified by the conditions under which he worked; a weak and anæmic man, he loved bloodshed as a cripple loves athletics—passionately and with the intimate enthusiasm of make-believe which an imaginative man can bring to bear on the contemplation of what can never be his. His natural attraction for "redness and juice" in life was seconded by a delightful and fantastic sense of the boundless possibilities of romance in everyday things. To

a Realist a hansom-cab driver is a man who makes twenty-five shillings a week, lives in a back street in Pimlico, has a wife who drinks and children who grow up with an alcoholic taint; the Realist will compare his lot with other cab-drivers, and find what part of his life is the product of the cab-driving environment, and on that basis he will write his book. To Stevenson and to the Romanticist generally, a hansom-cab driver is a mystery behind whose apparent commonplaceness lie magic possibilities beyond all telling; not one but may be the agent of the Prince of Bohemia, ready to drive you off to some mad and magic adventure in a street which is just as commonplace to the outward eye as the cab-driver himself, but which implicates by its very deceitful commonness whole volumes of romance. The novel-reader to whom *Demos* was the repetition of what he had seen and known and what had planted sickness in his soul, found the *New Arabian Nights* a refreshing miracle. Stevenson had discovered that modern London had its possibilities of romance. To these two elements of his romantic equipment must be added a third—travel. Defoe never left England, and other early Romanticists less gifted with invention than he wrote from the mind's eye and from books. To Stevenson, and to his successor Mr Kipling, whose "discovery" of India is one of the salient facts of modern English letters, and to Mr Conrad belongs the

credit of teaching novelists to draw on experience for the scenes they seek to present. A fourth element in the equipment of modern Romanticism —that which draws its effects from the "miracles" of modern science—has been added by Mr Wells, in whose work the Realist and Romantic schools seem finally to have united.

It was not till towards the end of the nineteenth century that one of the oldest and most popular forms of fiction, that of the short story, came to its own in our literature. Most of the novels of the Renaissance were short stories in the literal sense of the word, but into their brief compass they compressed a narrative which might well have served to eke out a long book, and when the short story was revived in the nineteenth century it made no attempt to follow this older plan. Commonly it sought simply to describe an incident or sketch a character, or perhaps even only to suggest some single emotional or pictorial effect. "I found," says Mr Wells, "that taking almost anything as a starting-point and letting my thoughts play about it, there would presently come out of the darkness in a manner quite inexplicable some absurd or vivid little incident more or less relevant to that initial nucleus. Little men in canoes upon sunlit oceans would come floating out of nothingness, incubating the eggs of prehistoric monsters unawares; violent conflicts would break out amidst the flower-beds of

suburban gardens; I would discover I was peering into remote and mysterious worlds, ruled by an order logical indeed, but other than our common sanity." That is the explanation of the making of one kind of short story—simply the art of making something very bright and moving, having this in common with the short stories of an earlier day, that it should not be longer than can conveniently in a short space of time be read aloud, but making no attempt as they did to state whole histories in the fraction of an hour. This new mode of short story, learnt perhaps from France, caught the imagination of English writers, and in no form of fiction is English literature in these later days more rich.

CHAPTER X

CONTEMPORARIES

How can we who are contemporaries tell whether an author's work is permanent or no? It is easy to find excuses for making a survey of English literature stop short of writers who are still working. The easiest and quickest stated is that one is anticipating the verdict of posterity. Of course, in a sense, the point of view expressed by the question is true enough. It is always idle to anticipate the verdict of posterity. Remember Matthew Arnold's prophecy that at the end of the nineteenth century Wordsworth and Byron would be the two great names in romantic poetry. We are fourteen years past that date now, and so far as Byron is concerned, at any rate, there is no sign that Arnold's prediction has come true. But the obvious fact that we cannot do our grandchildren's thinking for them, is no reason why we should refuse to think for ourselves. No notion is so destructive to the formation of a sound literary taste as the notion that books become literature only when their authors are dead. Round us men and women are putting into plays and poetry and

novels the best that they can or know. They are writing not for a dim and uncertain future, but for us, and on our recognition and welcome they depend, sometimes for their livelihood, always for the courage which carries them on to fresh endeavour. Literature is an ever-living and continuous thing, and we do it less than its due service if we are so occupied reading Shakespeare and Milton and Scott that we have no time to read Mr Yeats, Mr Masefield, Mr Shaw, or Mr Wells. Students of literature must remember that classics are being manufactured daily under their eyes, and that on their sympathy and comprehension depends whether an author receives the success he merits when he is alive to enjoy it.

The purpose of this chapter, then, is to indicate some characteristics of the general trend or drift of literary effort as a whole, and to give a rough picture of some of the lines or schools of contemporary art. The most remarkable literary feature of the age is without doubt its comparative inattention to poetry. Tennyson was a popular author; his books sold in thousands; his lines passed into that common conversational currency of unconscious quotation which is the surest testimony to the permeation of a poet's influence. Even Browning, though his popularity came late, found himself carried into all the nooks and corners of the reading public. His robust and masculine morality, understood at last, or expounded by

a semi-priestly class of interpreters, made him popular with those readers—and they are the majority — who love their reading to convey a moral lesson, just as Tennyson's reflection of his time's distraction between science and religion endeared them to those who found in him an answer, or at least an echo, to their own perplexities. A work widely different from either of these, FitzGerald's *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyam*, shared and has probably exceeded their popularity for similar reasons. Its easy pessimism and cult of pleasure, its delightful freedom from any demand for continuous thought from its readers, its appeal to the indolence and moral flaccidity which is implicit in all men, all contributed to its immense vogue; and among people who perhaps did not fully understand it, but were merely lulled by its son orousness, a knowledge of it has passed for the insignia of a love of literature and the possession of literary taste. But after FitzGerald—who? What poet has commanded the ear of the reading public or even a fraction of it? Not Swinburne certainly, partly because of his undoubted difficulty, partly because of a suspicion held of his moral and religious tenets, largely from material reasons quite unconnected with the quality of his work; not Morris, nor his followers; none as yet, unless it be Mr Masefield, of the younger school. Probably the only writer of verse who is at the same time a poet and has acquired a large popularity and public

influence is Mr Kipling. His work as a novelist we mentioned in the last chapter. It remains to say something of his achievements in verse.

Let us grant at once his faults. He can be violent, and over-rhetorical; he belabours you with sense impressions, and with the polysyllabic rhetoric he learned from Swinburne—and he is sometimes deficient, though rarely, in the finer shades of taste. But these things do not affect the main greatness of his work. He is great because he discovered not only a new method but a new subject-matter, and because of the white-heat of imagination which in his best things he brought to bear on it and by which he transfused it into poetry. It is Mr Kipling's special distinction that the apparatus of modern civilization—steam engines, and steamships, and telegraph lines, and the art of flight—take on in his hands a poetic quality as authentic and inspiring as any that ever was cast over the implements of other and what the mass of men believe to have been more picturesque days. Romance is in the present, so he teaches us, as well as in the past, and we do it wrong to leave it only the territory we have ourselves discarded in the advance of the race. That and the great discovery of India—an India coloured by his own prejudices, no doubt, but still the first presentment of an essential fact in our modern history as a people—give him the hold that he has, and rightly, over the minds of his readers.

But though from the death of Tennyson until no more than a year or two ago the English-speaking peoples have been inattentive to poetry, English poetry has gone on, a steady and unabated stream. Most of it, perhaps, has been heard of rather than heard, and it is not until the narrative poems of Mr Masefield, so recently published that they belong rather to the reviewer than to the literary historian, that any poetry of the best quality in thought and writing can be said to have caught the general ear. When Tennyson died he left two followers, neither closely imitative, but each, whatever his differences of outlook upon his art and the world, imbued with what may be called the Tennysonian spirit. Mr William Watson, making himself the laureate of the Liberal spirit, and so taking up a work which Swinburne laid down, has invested with unfailing gravity and dignity his verses on political themes, and, returning to an eighteenth-century habit, he has used poetry to criticise poetry with both finish and sureness of touch. The other follower of Tennyson, Mr Bridges, with not less learning and certainly more learned curiosity in metrical experiment, has perhaps more spontaneity, more of the stuff of poetry, and a fuller measure of the English spirit in his verse.

It is not with these, however—still less with Mr Kipling—that the main stream of English romantic poetry flows. The younger poets of the nineties

belonged, more or less, all to one school—the school which had its origin in England in the work of William Blake, but more, perhaps, in contemporary France in the writings of Baudelaire and Verlaine. Much of their work was imitative and none of it perhaps very profound, but each of them—Ernest Dowson and Lionel Johnson, who are both now dead, and others who are still living—produced enough to show that they had at their command a vein of poetry that might have deepened and proved richer had they gone on working it. One of them, Mr W. B. Yeats, by his birth and his reading in Irish legend and folklore, which was being collected during his youth by a few devoted students, became possessed of a subject-matter denied to his fellows, and it is from the combination of the mood of the decadents with the dreaminess and mystery of Celtic tradition and romance—a combination which came to pass in his poetry—that the Celtic school has sprung. In a sense, it has added to the territory explored by Coleridge and Scott and Morris a new province. Only, nothing could be further from the objectivity of these men than the way in which the Celtic school approaches its material. Its stories are clear to itself, it may be, but not to its readers. Deirdre and Conchubar, and Angus and Maeve and Dectora, and all the shadowy figures in them, scarcely become embodied. Their lives and deaths and loves and hates are only a scheme on which they weave a delicate and dim

embroidery of pure poetry—of love and death and old age and the passing of beauty and all the sorrows that have been since the world began and will be till the world ends. If Mr Kipling is of the earth earthy, if the clangour and rush of the world is in everything he writes, Mr Yeats and his school live consciously sequestered and withdrawn, and the world never breaks in on their ghostly troubles or their peace. Poetry never fails to relate itself to its age; if it is not with it, it is against it; it is never merely indifferent. The poetry of these men is the denial, passionately made, of everything the world prizes. When such a denial is sincere, as in the best of them, then the verses they make are true and fine. When it is assumed, as in some of their imitators, then the work they did is not true poetry. But it would be no (or only a little) more than the truth to say that at no period in the past was English poetry more full of promise than it is at the present moment.

But the literary characteristic of the present age —the one which is most likely to differentiate it from its predecessor—is the revival of the drama. When we left it before the Commonwealth the great English literary school of playwriting—the romantic drama—was already dead. It has had since no second birth. There followed after it the heroic tragedy of Dryden and Shadwell, a turgid, declamatory form of art without importance; and

two brilliant comic periods—the earlier and greater that of Congreve and Wycherley: the later, more sentimental, with less art and vivacity, that of Goldsmith and Sheridan. With Sheridan the drama as a literary force died a second time. It has been born again only in our own day. It is, of course, unnecessary to point out that the writing of plays did not cease in the interval; it never does cease. The production of dramatic journey-work has been continuous since the reopening of the theatres in 1660, and it is carried on as plentifully as ever at this present time. Only, side by side with it there has grown up a new literary drama, and gradually the main stream of artistic endeavour, which for nearly a century has preoccupied itself with the novel almost to the exclusion of other forms of art, has turned back to the stage as its channel to articulation and an audience. An influence from abroad set it in motion. The plays of Ibsen—produced, the best of them, in the eighties of last century—came to England in the nineties. In a way, perhaps, they were misunderstood by their worshippers hardly less than by their enemies; but all excrescences of enthusiasm apart, they taught men a new and freer approach to moral questions, and a new and freer dramatic technique. Where plays had been constructed on a journeyman plan evolved by Labiche and Sardou —mid-nineteenth-century writers in France—a plan delighting in symmetry, close-jointedness,

false correspondences, an impossible use of coincidence, and a quite unreal complexity and elaboration, they become bolder and less artificial, more close to the likelihoods of real life. The gravity of the problems with which they set themselves to deal heightened their influence. In England men began to ask themselves whether the theatre here too could not be made an avenue towards the discussion of living difficulties; and then arose the new school of dramatists—of whom the first and most remarkable is Mr George Bernard Shaw. In his earlier plays he set himself boldly to attack established conventions, and to ask his audiences to think for themselves. *Arms and the Man* dealt a blow at the cheap romanticism with which a peace-living public invests the profession of arms; *The Devil's Disciple* was a shrewd criticism of the preposterous self-sacrifice on which melodrama, which is the most popular non-literary form of play-writing, is commonly based; *Mrs Warren's Profession* made a brave and plain-spoken attempt to drag the public face to face with the nauseous realities of prostitution; *Widowers' Houses* laid bare the sordidness of a society which bases itself on the exploitation of the poor for the luxuries of the rich. It took Mr Shaw close on ten years to persuade even the moderate number of men and women who make up a theatre audience that his plays were worth listening to. But before his final success came he had attained a substantial popu-

larity with the public which reads. Possibly his early failure on the stage—mainly due to the obstinacy of playgoers immersed in a stock tradition—was partly due also to his failure in constructive power. He is an adept at tying knots and impatient of unravelling them; his third acts are apt either to evaporate in talk or to find some unreal and unsatisfactory solution for the complexity he has created. But constructive weakness apart, his amazing brilliance and fecundity of dialogue ought to have given him an immediate and lasting grip of the stage. There has probably never been a dramatist who could invest conversation with the same vivacity and point, the same combination of surprise and inevitableness, that distinguishes his best work.

Alongside of Mr Shaw, more immediately successful, and not traceable to any obvious influence, English or foreign, came the comedies of Oscar Wilde. For a parallel to their pure delight and high spirits, and to the exquisite wit and artifice with which they were constructed, one would have to go back to the dramatists of the Restoration. To Congreve and his school, indeed, Wilde belongs rather than to any later period. With his own age he had little in common; he was without interest in its social and moral problems; when he approved of socialism it was because in a socialist state the artist might be absolved from the necessity of earning a living, and be free to follow his art undisturbed

He loved to think of himself as symbolic, but all he symbolized was a fantasy of his own creating; his attitude to his age was decorative and withdrawn rather than representative. He was the licensed jester to society, and in that capacity he gave us his plays. Mr Shaw may be said to have founded a school; at any rate he gave the start to Mr Galsworthy and some lesser dramatists, and taught novelists to try their luck on the stage. Wilde founded nothing, and his works remain as complete and separate as those of the earlier artificial dramatists of two centuries before.

Another school of drama, homogeneous and quite apart from the rest, remains. We have seen how the "Celtic Revival," as the Irish literary movement has been called by its admirers, gave us a new kind of romantic poetry. As an offshoot from it there came into being some ten years ago an Irish school of drama, drawing its inspiration from two sources—the body of the old Irish legends and the highly individualized and richly coloured life of the Irish peasants in the mountains of Wicklow and of the West, a life, so the dramatists believed, still unspoiled by the cheapening influences of a false system of education and the wear and tear of a civilization whose values are commercial and not spiritual or artistic. The school founded its own theatre, trained its own actors, fashioned its own modes of speech (the chief of which was a frank restoration of rhythm in the speaking of verse and of cadence

in prose), and, having all these things, it produced a series of plays all directed to its special ends, and all composed and written with a special fidelity to country life as it has been preserved, or to what it conceived to be the spirit of Irish folk-legend. It reached its zenith quickly, and, as far as the production of plays is concerned, it would seem to be already in its decline. That is to say, what in the beginning was a fresh and vivid inspiration caught direct from life, has become a pattern whose colours and shape can be repeated or varied by lesser writers who take their teaching from the original discoverers. But in the course of its brief and striking course it produced one great dramatist—a writer whom already, not three years after his death, men instinctively class with the masters of his art.

J. M. Synge, in the earlier years of his manhood, lived entirely abroad, leading the life of a wandering scholar from city to city and country to country till he was persuaded to give up the Continent and the criticism and imitation of French literature, to return to England, and to go and live on the Aran Islands. From that time till his death—some ten years—he spent a large part of each year amongst the peasantry of the desolate Atlantic coast and wrote the plays by which his name is known. His literary output was not large, but he supplied the Irish dramatic movement with exactly what it needed—a vivid contact with the realities of life.

Not that he was a mere student or transcriber of manners. His wandering life among many peoples and his study of classical French and German literature had equipped him as perhaps no other modern dramatist has been equipped with an imaginative insight and a reach of perception which enabled him to give universality and depth to his portrayal of the peasant types around him. He got down to the great elemental forces which throb and pulse beneath the common crises of everyday life, and laid them bare, not as ugly and horrible, but with a sense of their terror, their beauty, and their strength. His earliest play, *The Well of the Saints*, treats of a sorrow that is as old as Helen, of the vanishing of beauty and the irony of fulfilled desire. The great realities of death pass through the *Riders to the Sea*, till the language takes on a kind of simplicity as of written words shrivelling up in a flame. *The Playboy of the Western World* is a study of character, terrible in its clarity, but never losing the savour of imagination and of the astringency and saltness that was characteristic of his temper. He had at his command an instrument of incomparable fineness and range in the language which he fashioned out the speech of the common people amongst whom he lived. In his dramatic writings this language took on a kind of rhythm which had the effect of producing a certain remoteness of the highest possible artistic value. The people

of his imagination appear a little disembodied. They talk with that straightforward and simple kind of innocency which makes strange and impressive the dialogue of Maeterlinck's earlier plays. Through it, as Mr Yeats has said, he saw the subject-matter of his art "with wise, clear-seeing, unreflecting eyes—and he preserved the innocence of good art in an age of reasons and purposes." He had no theory except of his art; no "ideas" and no "problems"; he did not wish to change anything or to reform anything; but he saw all his people pass by as before a window, and he heard their words. This resolute refusal to be interested in or to take account of current modes of thought has been considered by some to detract from his eminence. Certainly, if by "ideas" we mean current views on society or morality, he is deficient in them; only, his very deficiency brings him nearer to the great masters of drama—to Ben Jonson, to Cervantes, to Molière, even to Shakespeare himself. Probably in no single case amongst our contemporaries could a high and permanent place in literature be prophesied with more confidence than in his.

In the past it has seemed impossible for fiction and the drama, *i.e.* serious drama of high literary quality, to flourish side by side. It seems as though the best creative minds in any age could find strength for any one of these two great outlets for the activity of the creative imagination.

In the reign of Elizabeth the drama outshone fiction; in the reign of Victoria the novel crowded out the drama. There are signs that a literary era is beginning in which the drama will regain to the full its position as a literature. More and more the bigger creative artists will turn to a form which by its economy of means to ends, and the chance it gives not merely of observing but of creating and displaying character in action, has a more vigorous principle of life in it than its rival.

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